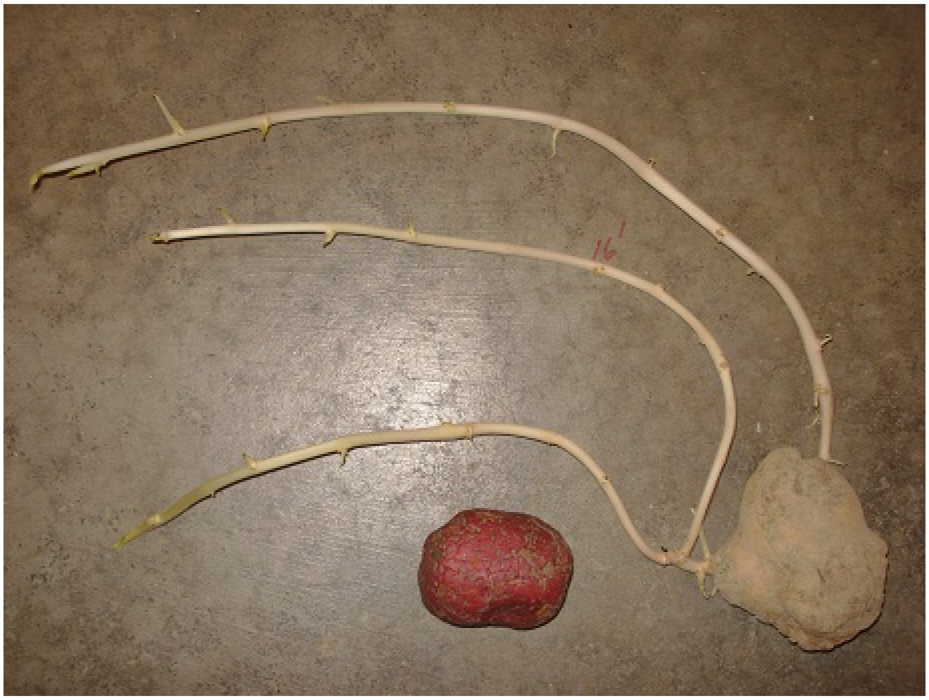
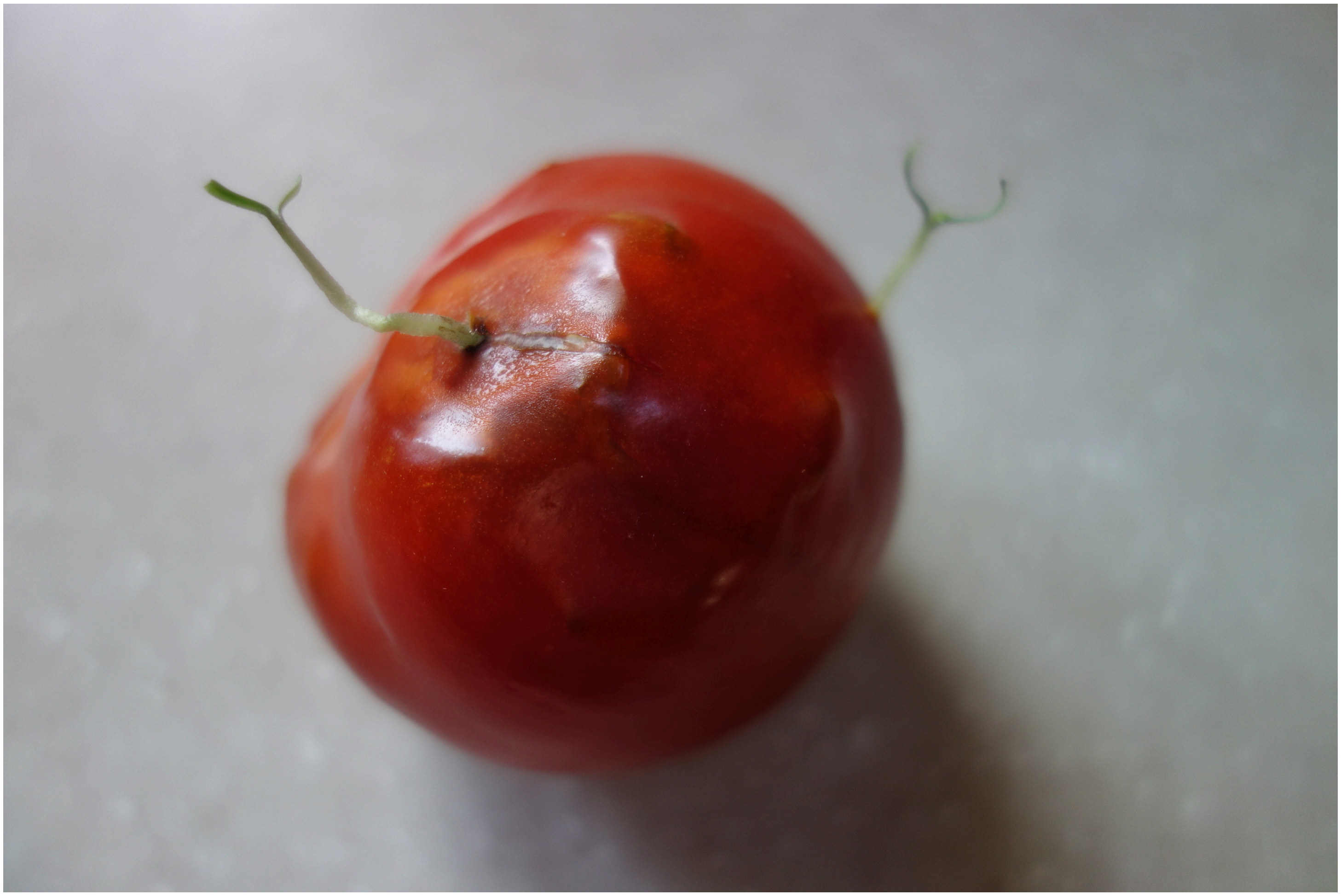


Green Giant store-bought red potato vs. home-grown farmers' market potato. Both stored in the root cellar for 6 months.

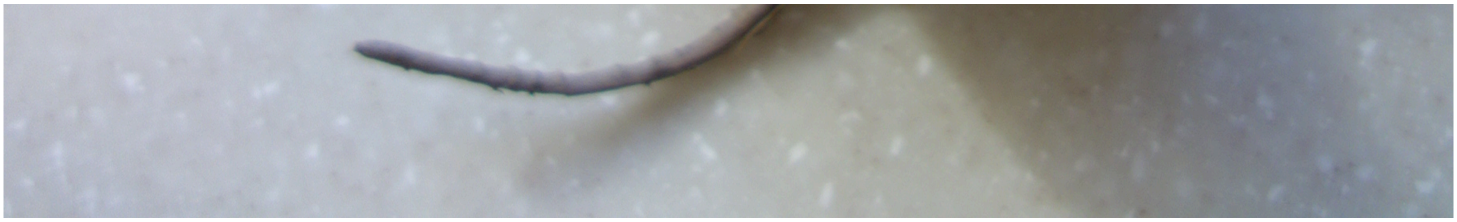
Food photos: D.D.Teoli Jr.

I got my start in root cellaring from potatoes. Years ago, I discovered that they treated store-bought potatoes not to sprout. They may do this from radiation or chemicals. The store-bought potatoes also tasted different than home-grown potatoes. I could only get home-grown potatoes from summer farmers' markets. So, I tried saving some of the home-grown potatoes in the winter. Now, I don't have a traditional root cellar dug into the ground. I don't have any extra room in the ground to dig it. I got a spot in the garage that gets cold, so I use it. It works pretty good as long as it is cold outside. Temperature varies from 38 degrees F to 56 degrees F in the winter. It only lacks the ability for humidity that is important for storing certain things.

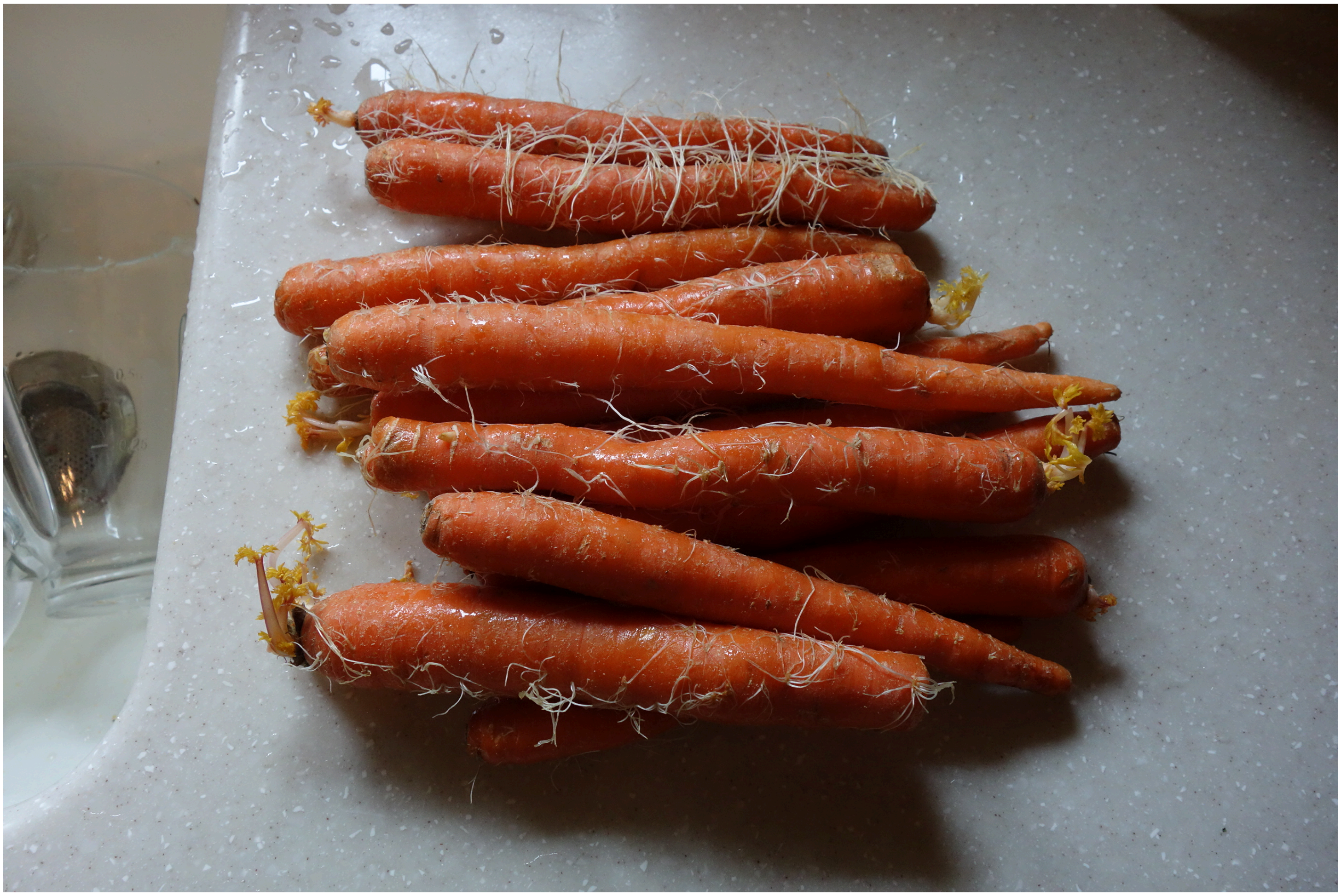
I'd go in and out of root cellaring over the years depending on what was happening in my life. Covid revived my interest in root cellaring. Back then I could not get out to shop regularly with all the covid mess. Another year I had hurt my plantar fascia doing some spade work. That took a year+ to heal up and that put a crimp on my regular shopping schedule. It is interesting seeing how food ages when stored in the root cellar.



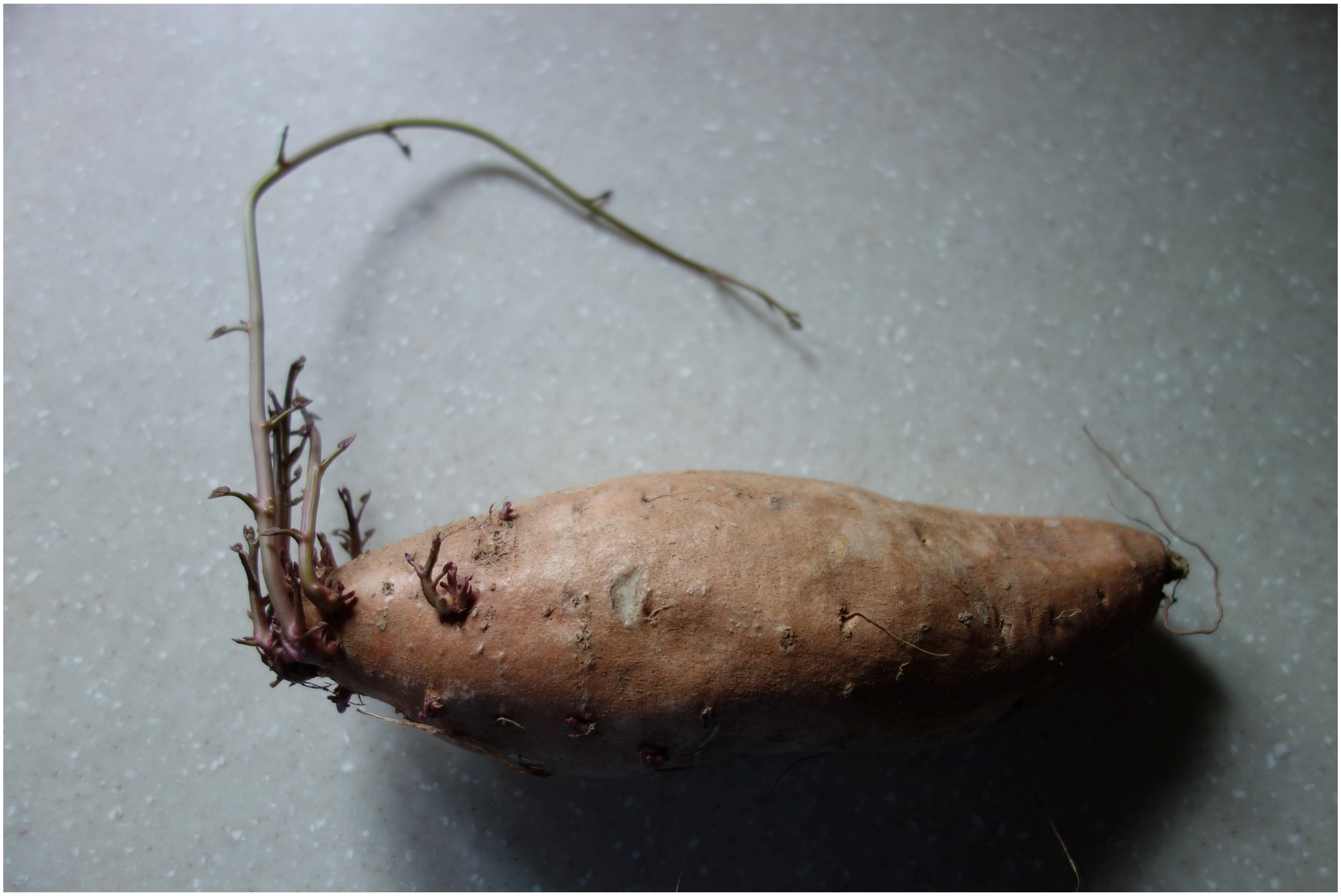
If you keep tomatoes long enough, they start to sprout little tomato plants from within.



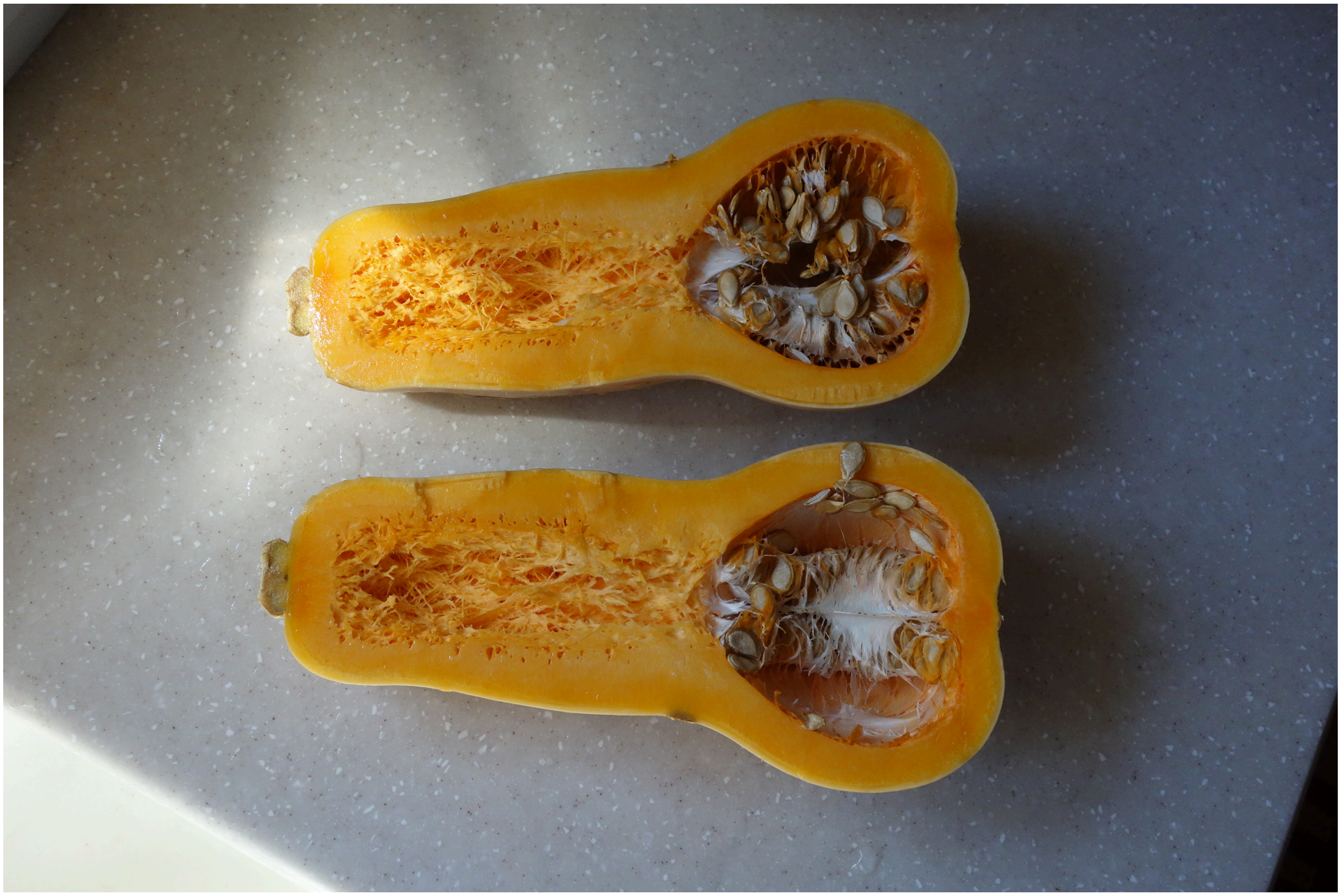
Beets start to grow in the root cellar.



So do carrots.



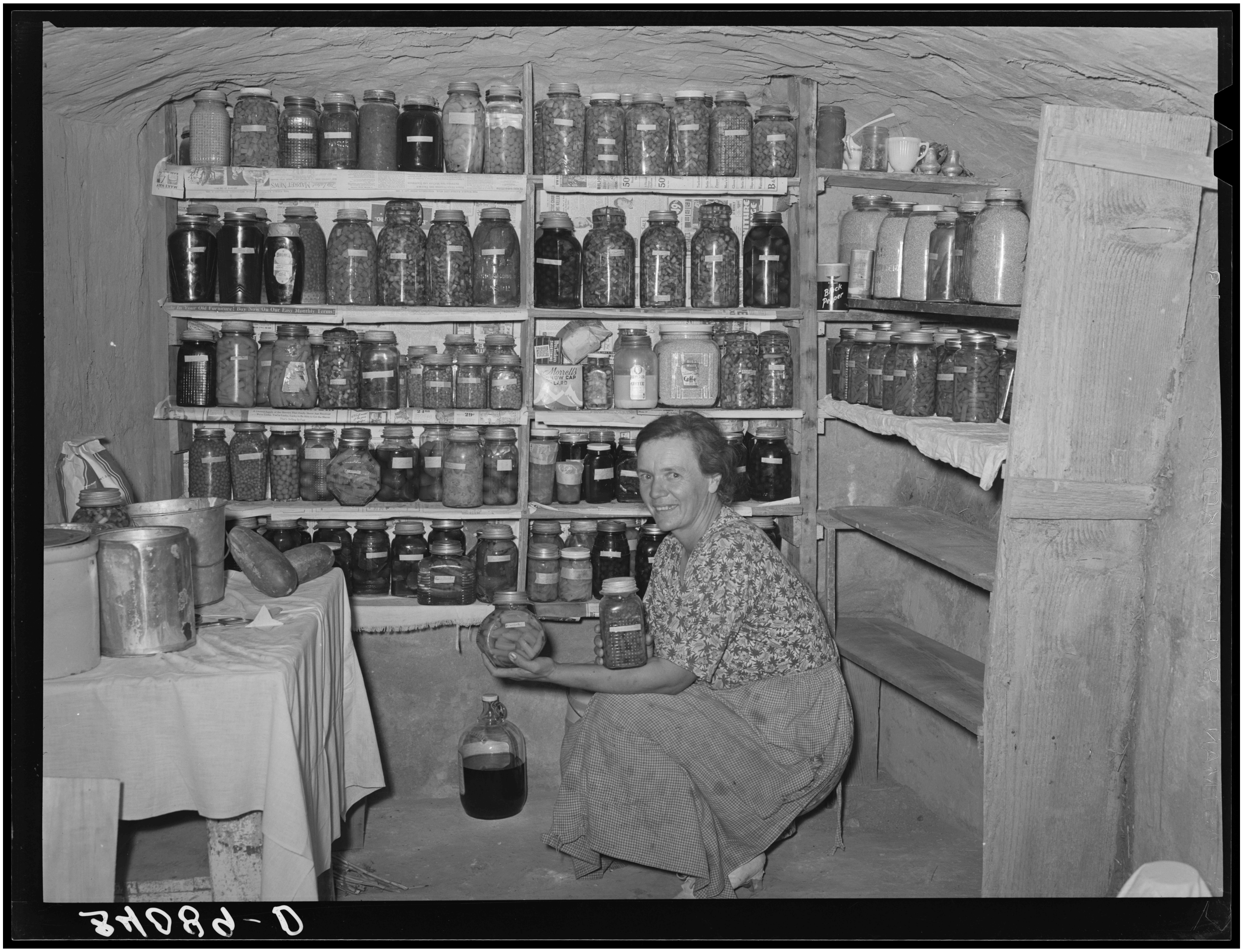
A yam from the root cellar.

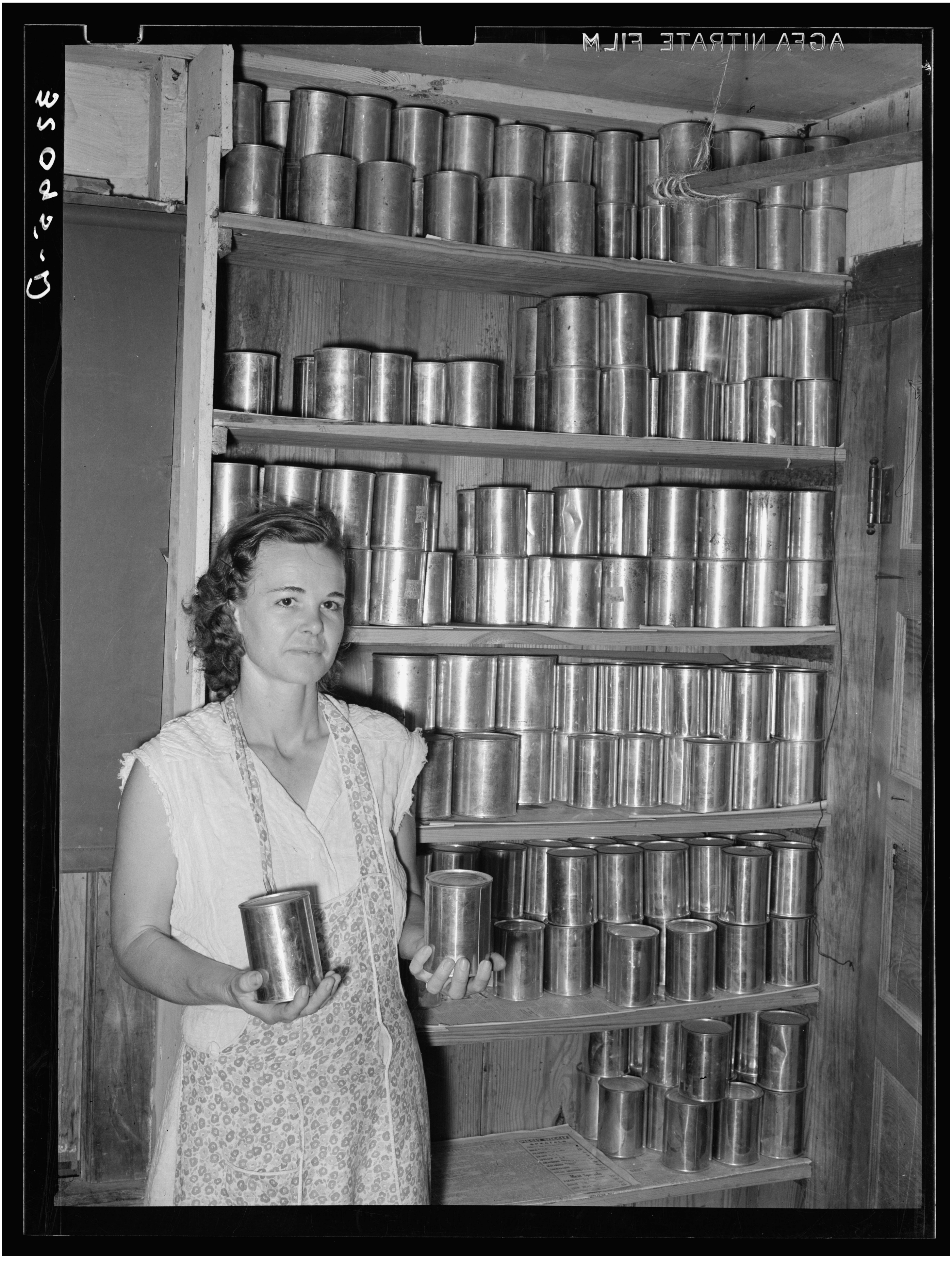


Squash stores the best. This is a squash stored in the root cellar for 1 year. It gets a little hollow inside after a year, but is still doable. Storing it that long is not my goal, I just get some stragglers I don't get to eating. Even though I do lots of cooking, I don't like cooking. It is one of those love / hate things. It comes under the auspices of...if you want something to eat, then you are going to have to cook something.

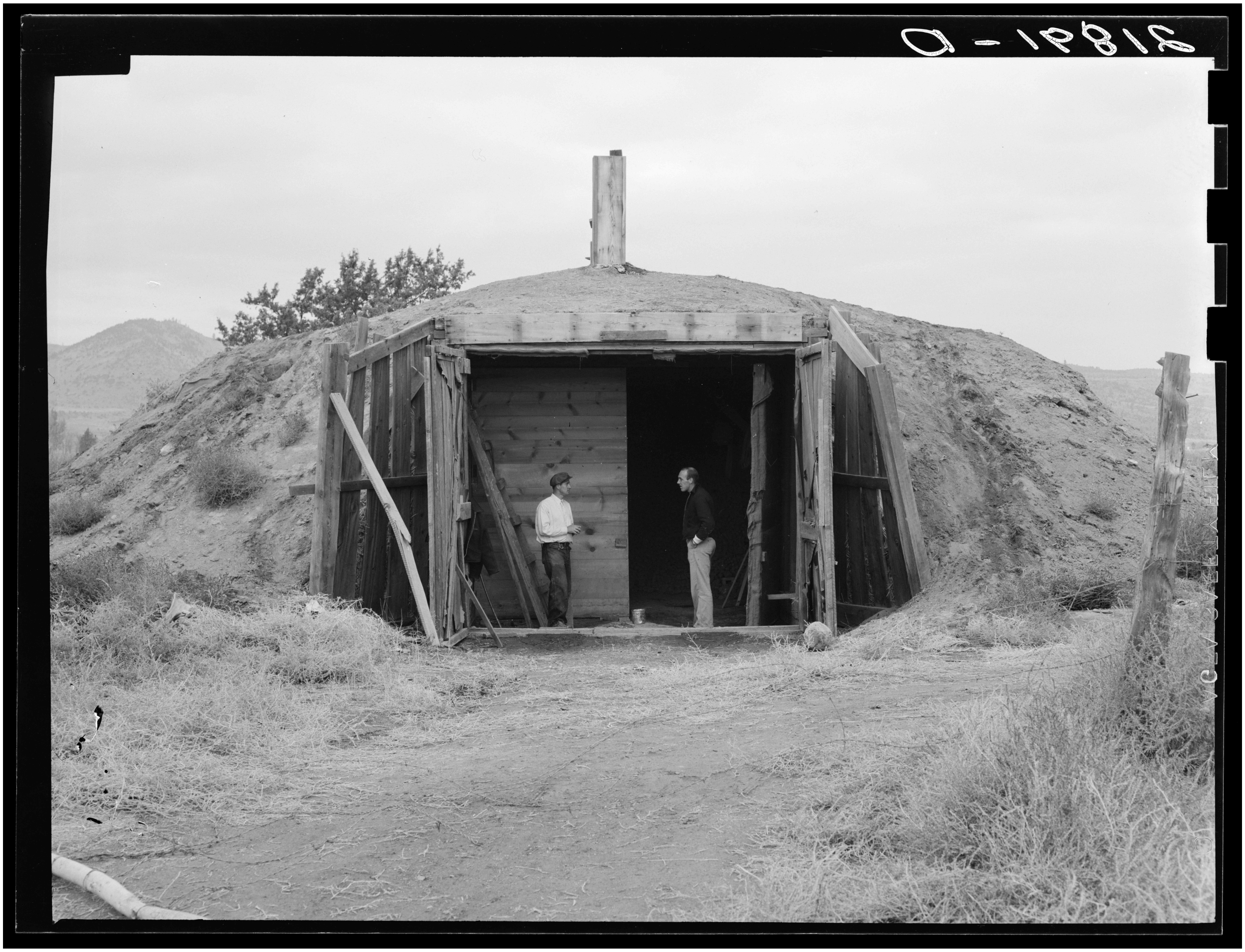
Most of these people shown in the photos are called rehabilitation borrowers. Being an archivist and interested in history I went back in time to see how the old timers did their root cellaring. I learned a lot of things about that era. I will tell you more about it at the end.

All photos: LoC

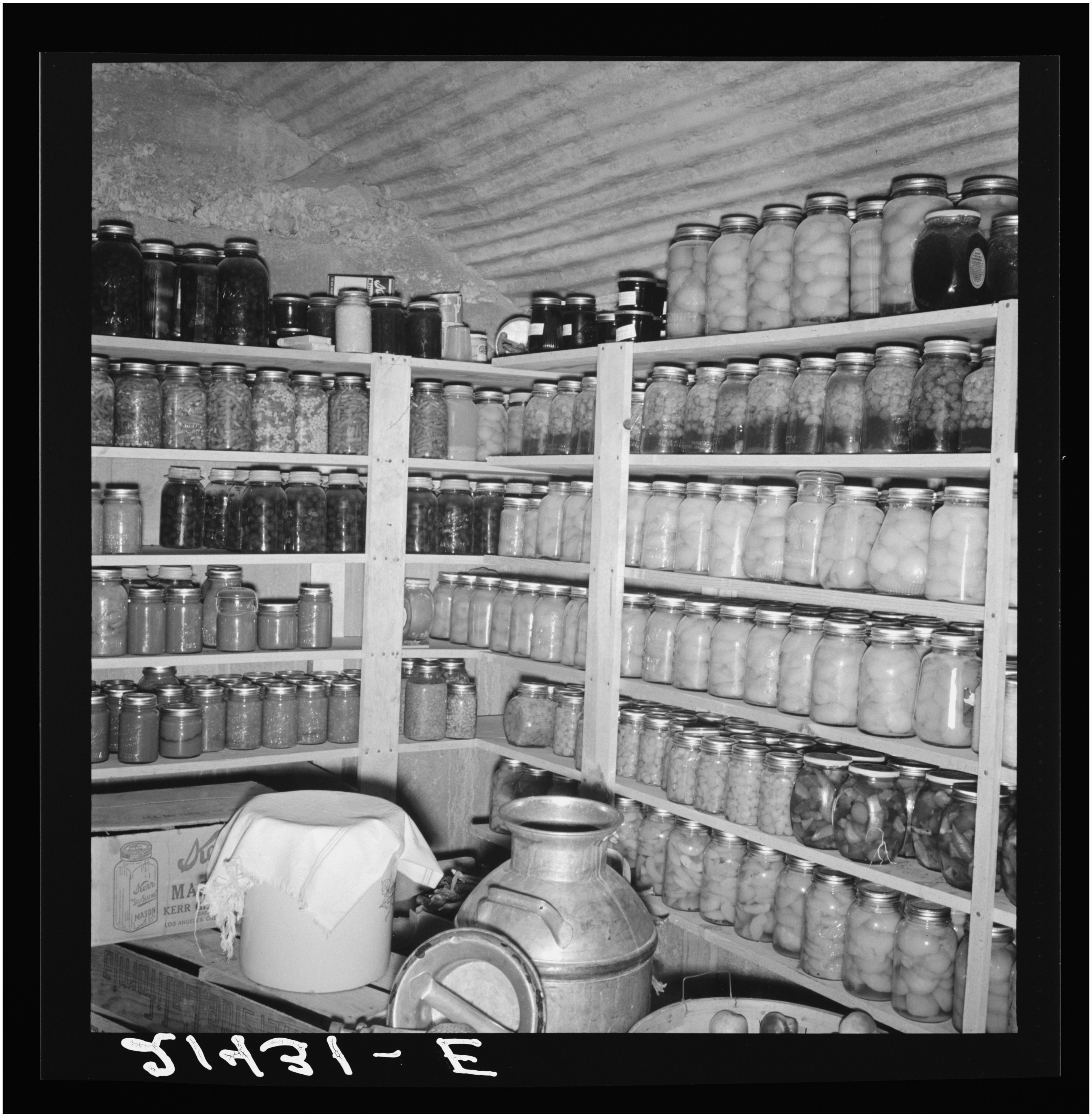

D-68048


G-26053
AGFA NITRATE FILM

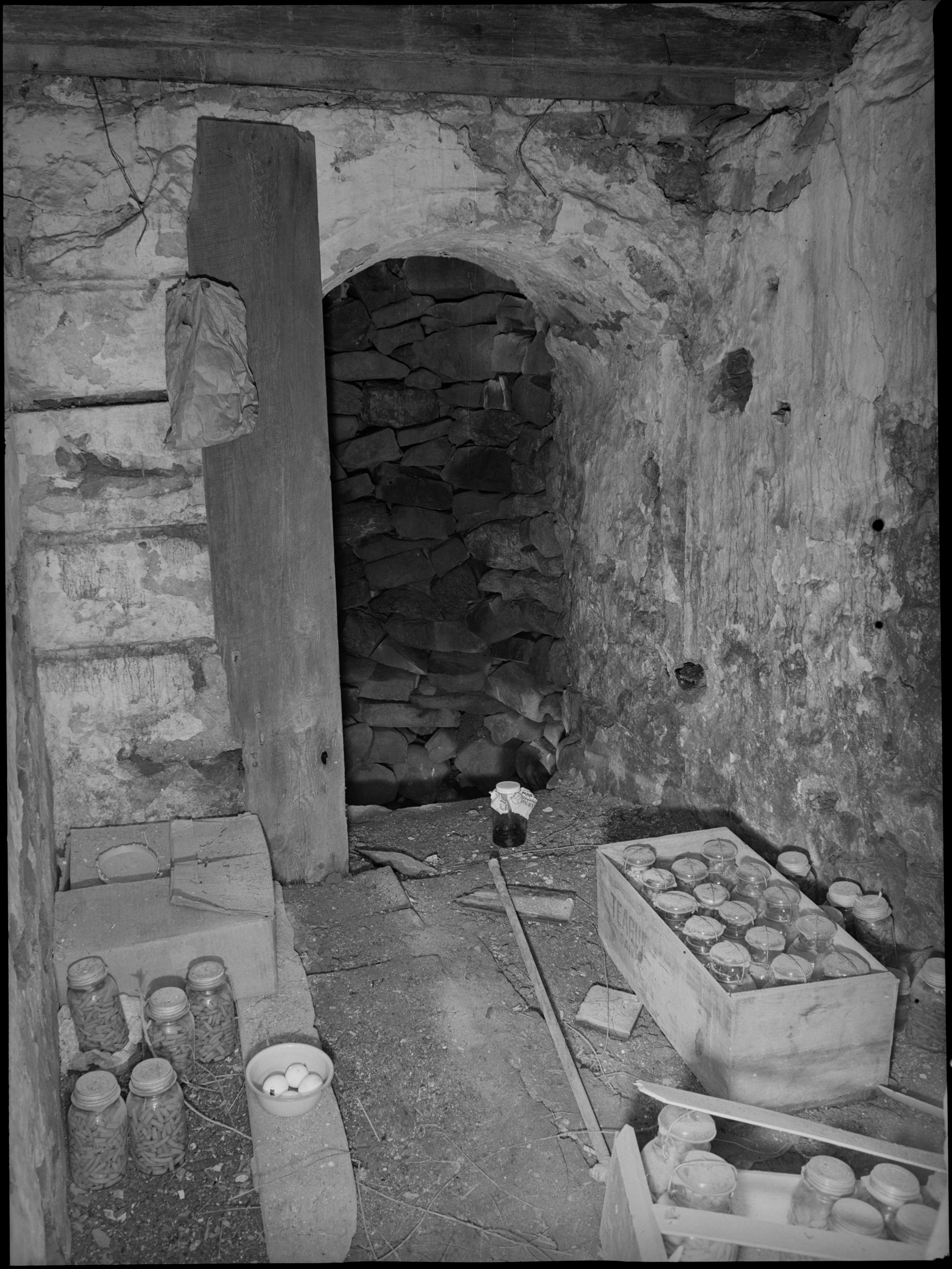
All the root cellars I saw use glass jars for canning. This gal must have had an actual canning machine. Can't ask her, she is dead now. That is why we preserve history.



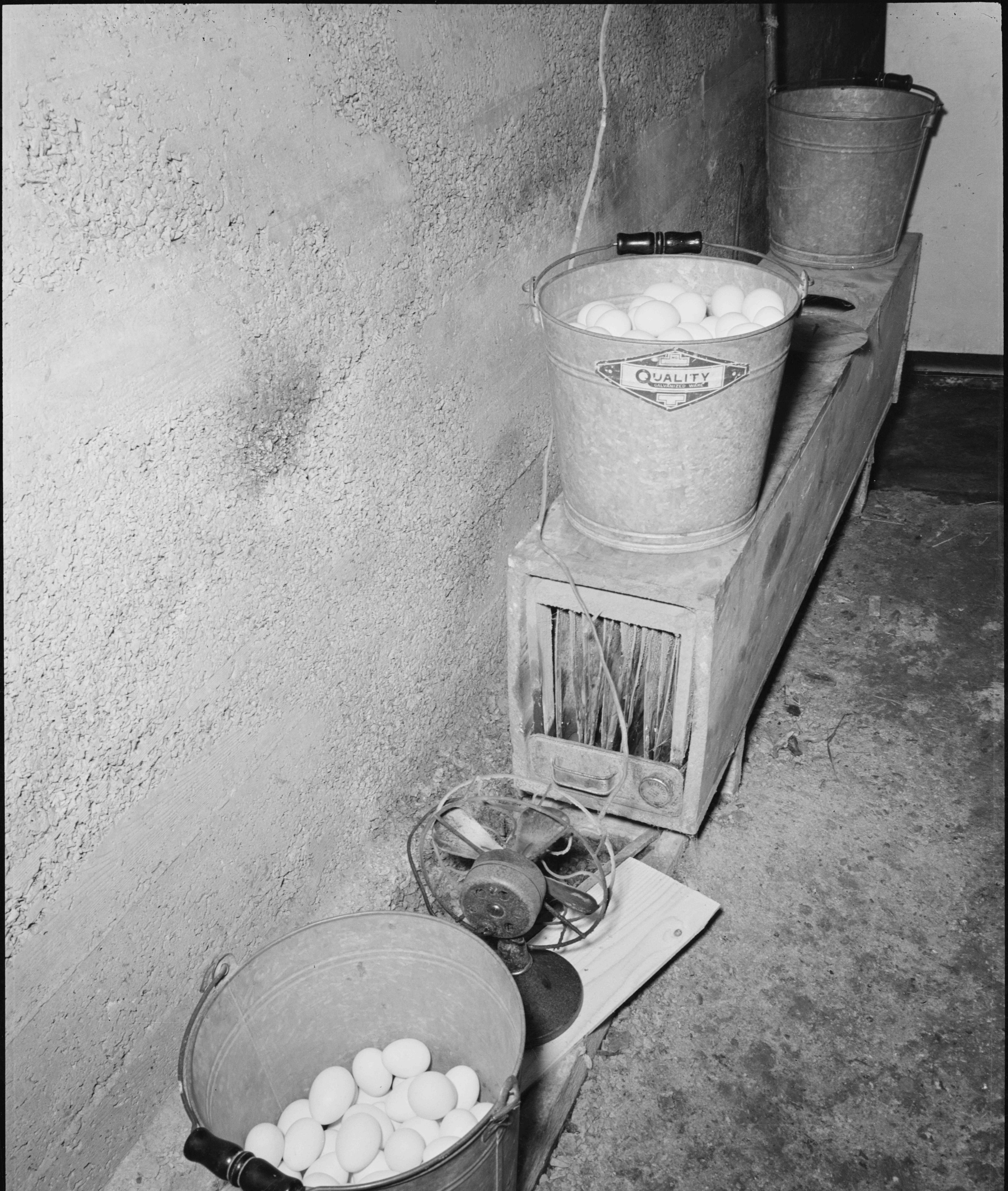
Root cellars were built above ground sometimes. If the water table was high or your land had shallow bedrock you built above ground.



They would store fermented kraut or pickles in the crocks along with fresh fruit, vegetables, eggs, milk / dairy, lard, canned goods and homemade wine in the cellar. Some people would also store smoked meats. Crock kraut and pickles is different than canned kraut or pickles. Canning with heat and vinegar kills any benefit from fermentation.



40531-D



AGFA SAFETY FILM

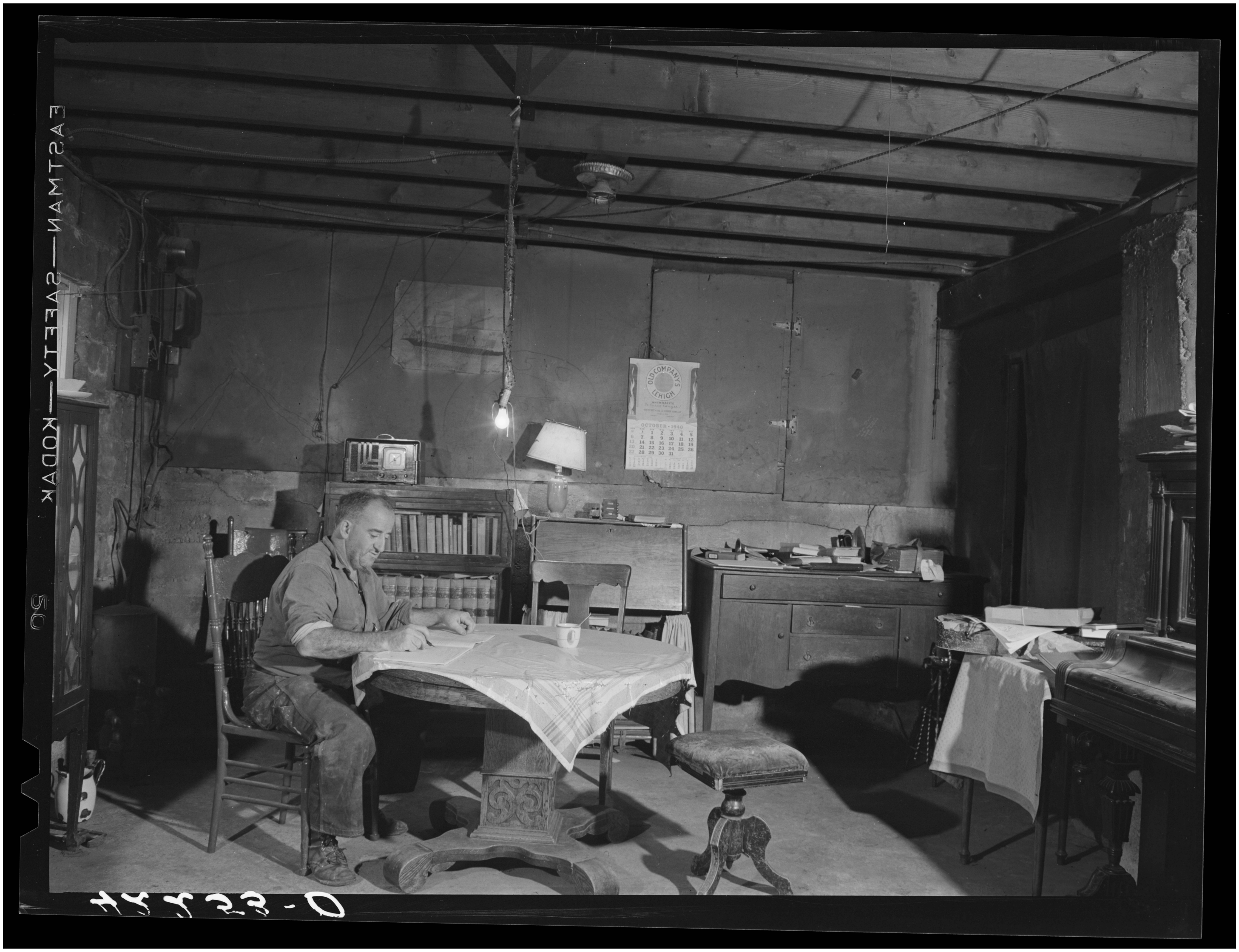
This setup raised humidity in the cellar. A fan was used to blow air through wet material in the box.

EASTMAN—SAFETY—KODAK

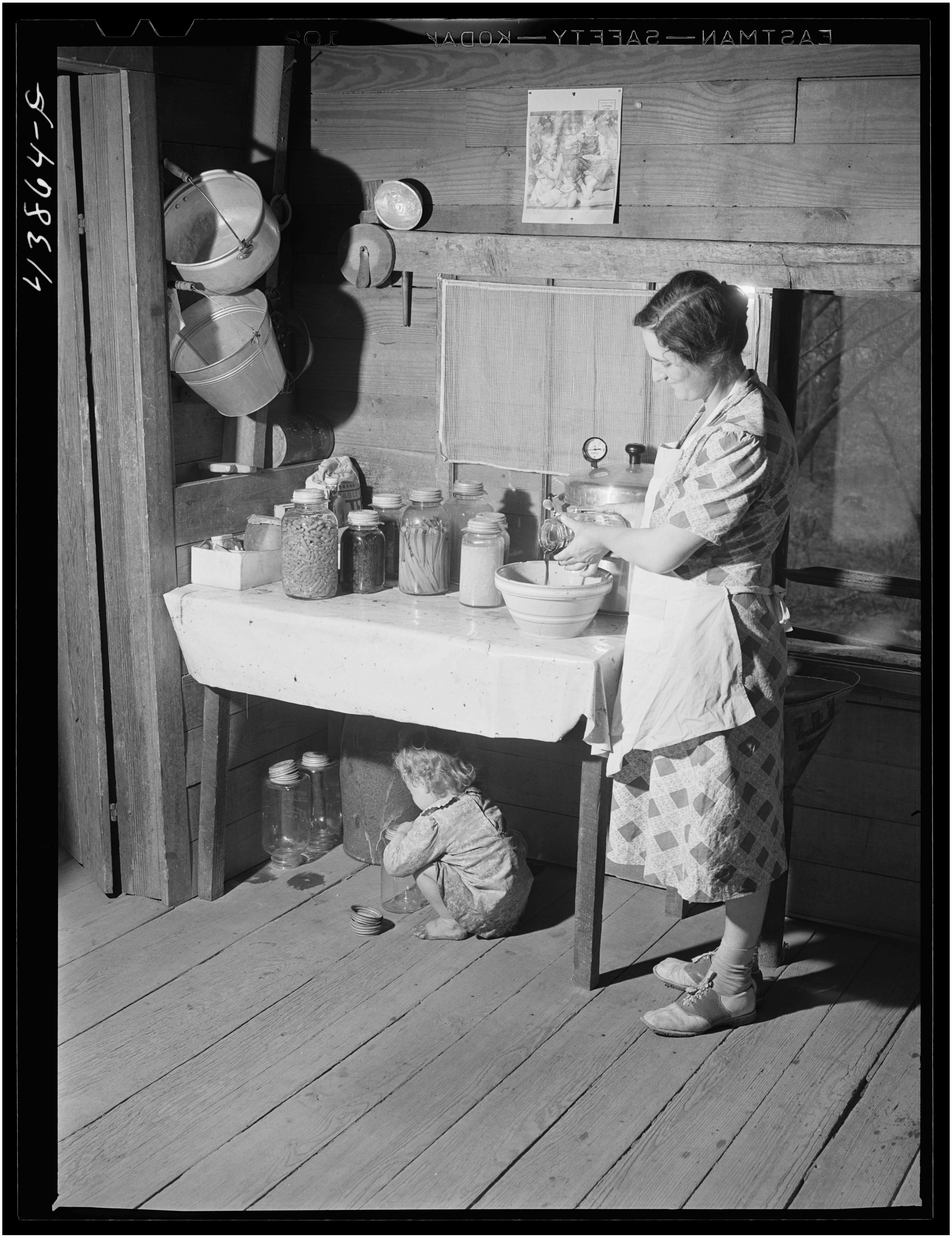
Cooperage was a big deal back then. They didn't have plastic, you either used glass, ceramic, baskets or wood barrels and crates to store things.

Here is a film about the cooper.

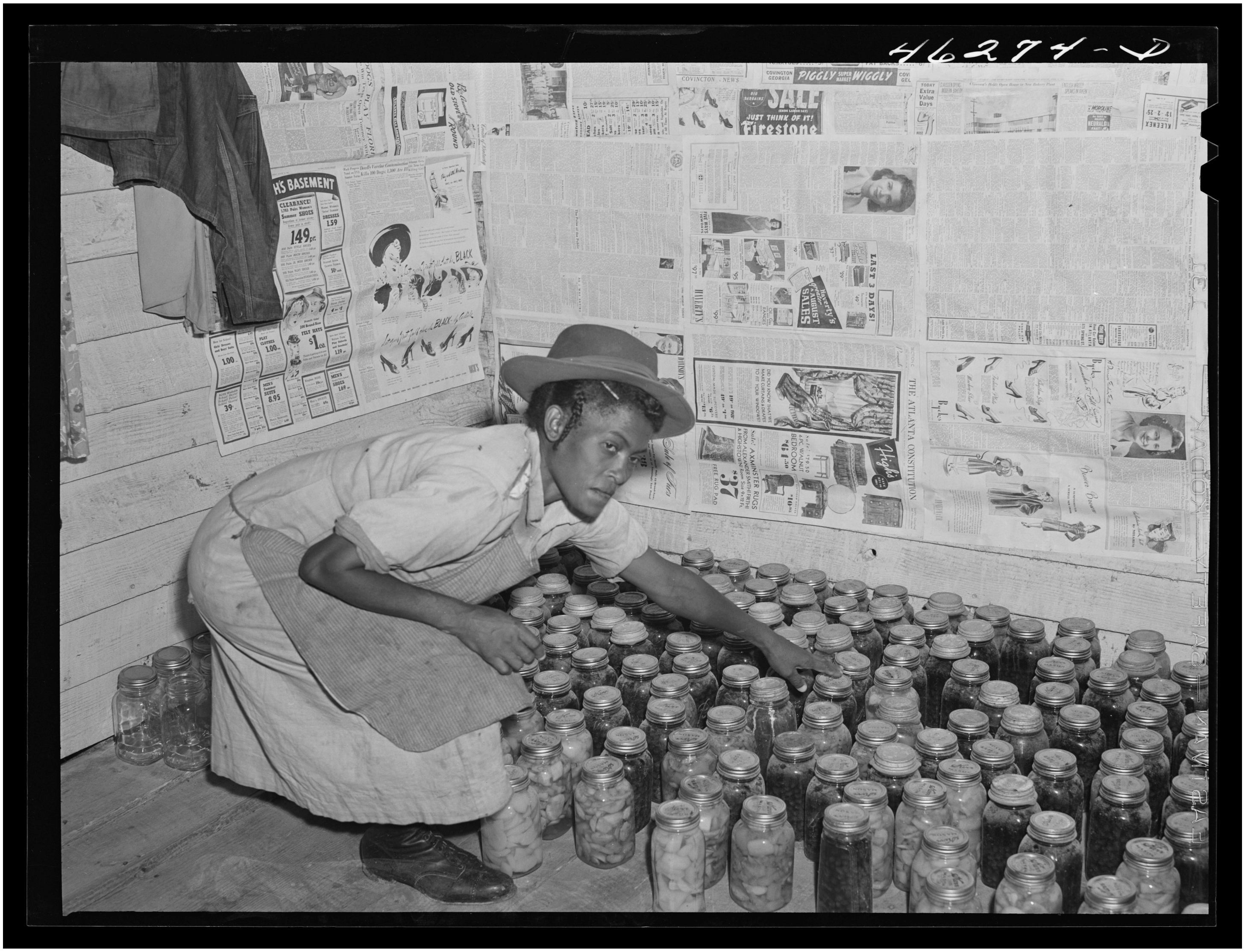
The Cooper's Craft Williamsburg 1967 VHS D. D. Teoli Jr. A. C. : D. D. Teoli Jr. A. C. : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive


OLD COMPANY'S LEHIGH

This family lived in the cellar. The house burned down and all they had left was the cellar.

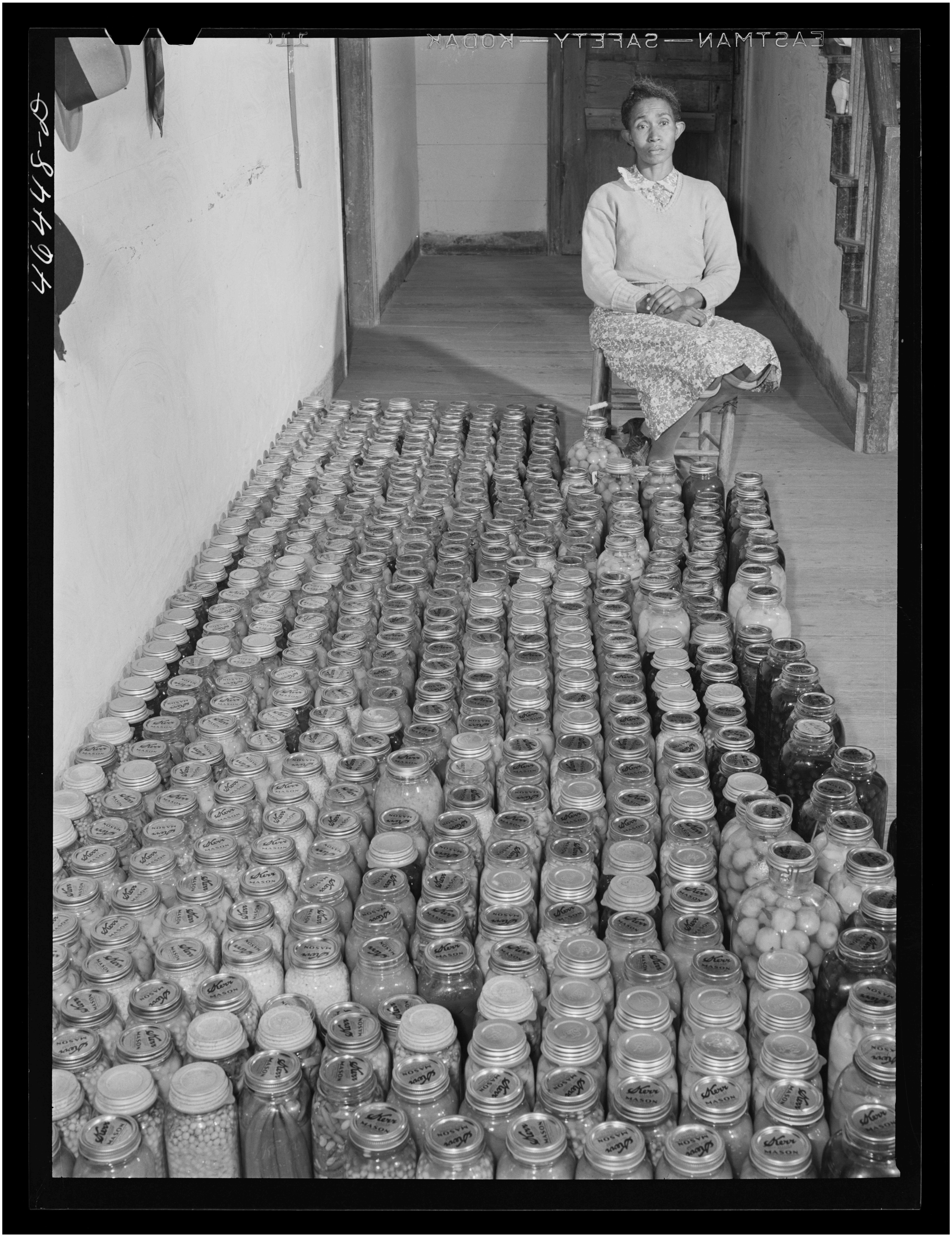

43864-D
EASTMAN — SAFETY — KODAK

Some people were very tight on space. Kids made toys out of all sorts of things. My dad said his family gave him an empty can to play with.

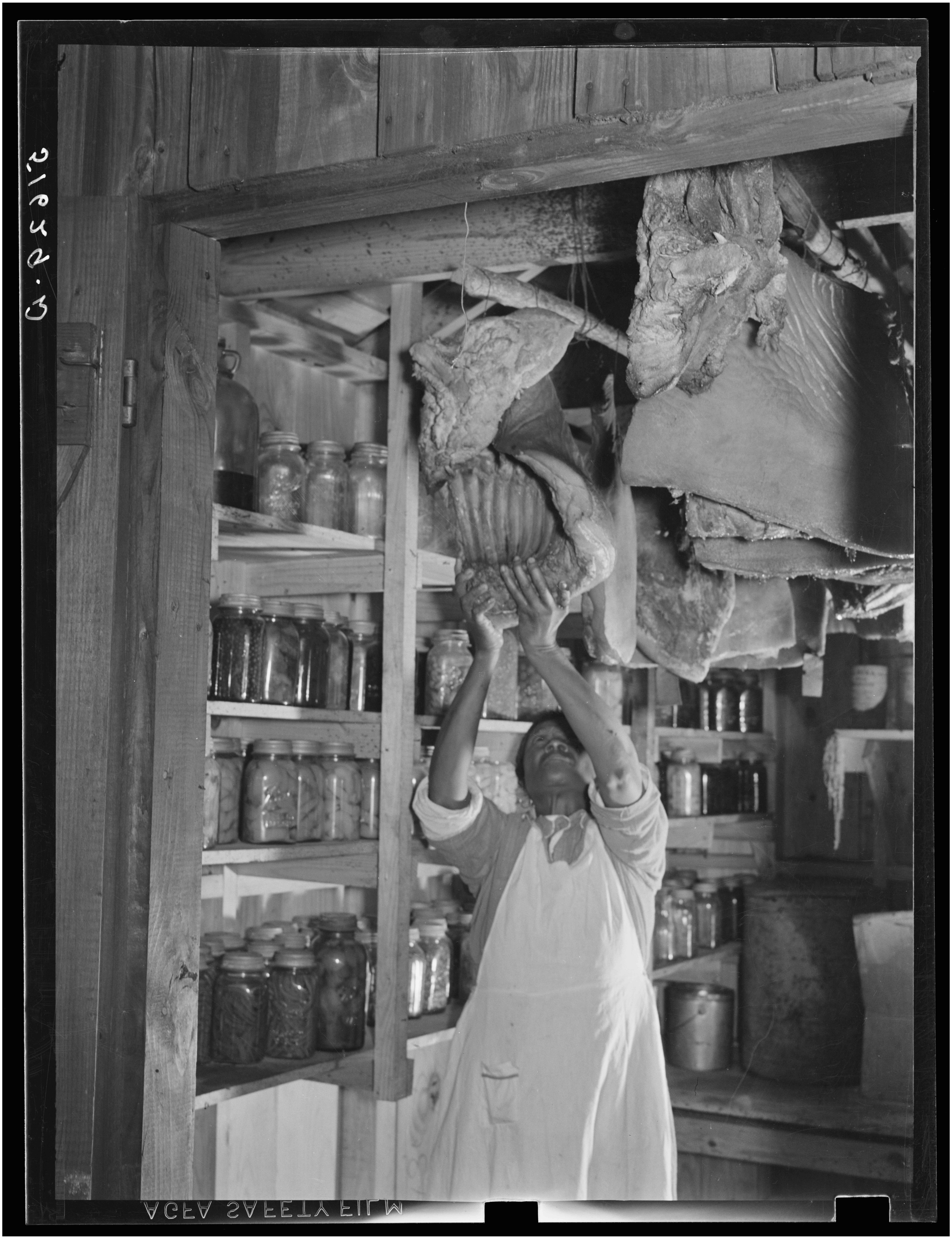


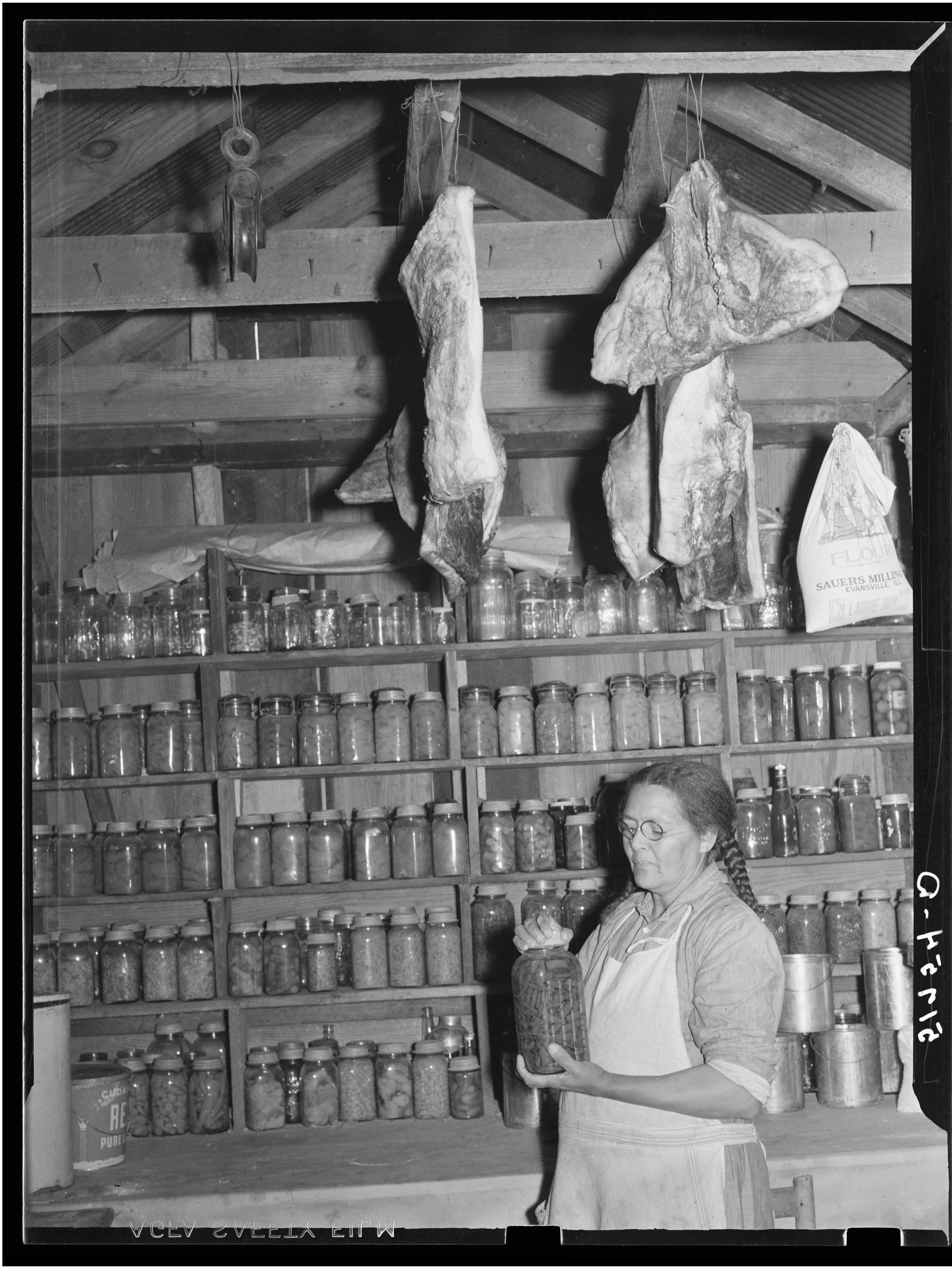
46274-D

PIGGLY WIGGLY
COVINGTON GEORGIA
SALE
JUST THINK OF IT!
Firestone
HS BASEMENT
CLEARANCE!
LAST 3 DAYS!
THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION


D-844874
EASTMAN—SAFETY—KODAK
Kerr MASON

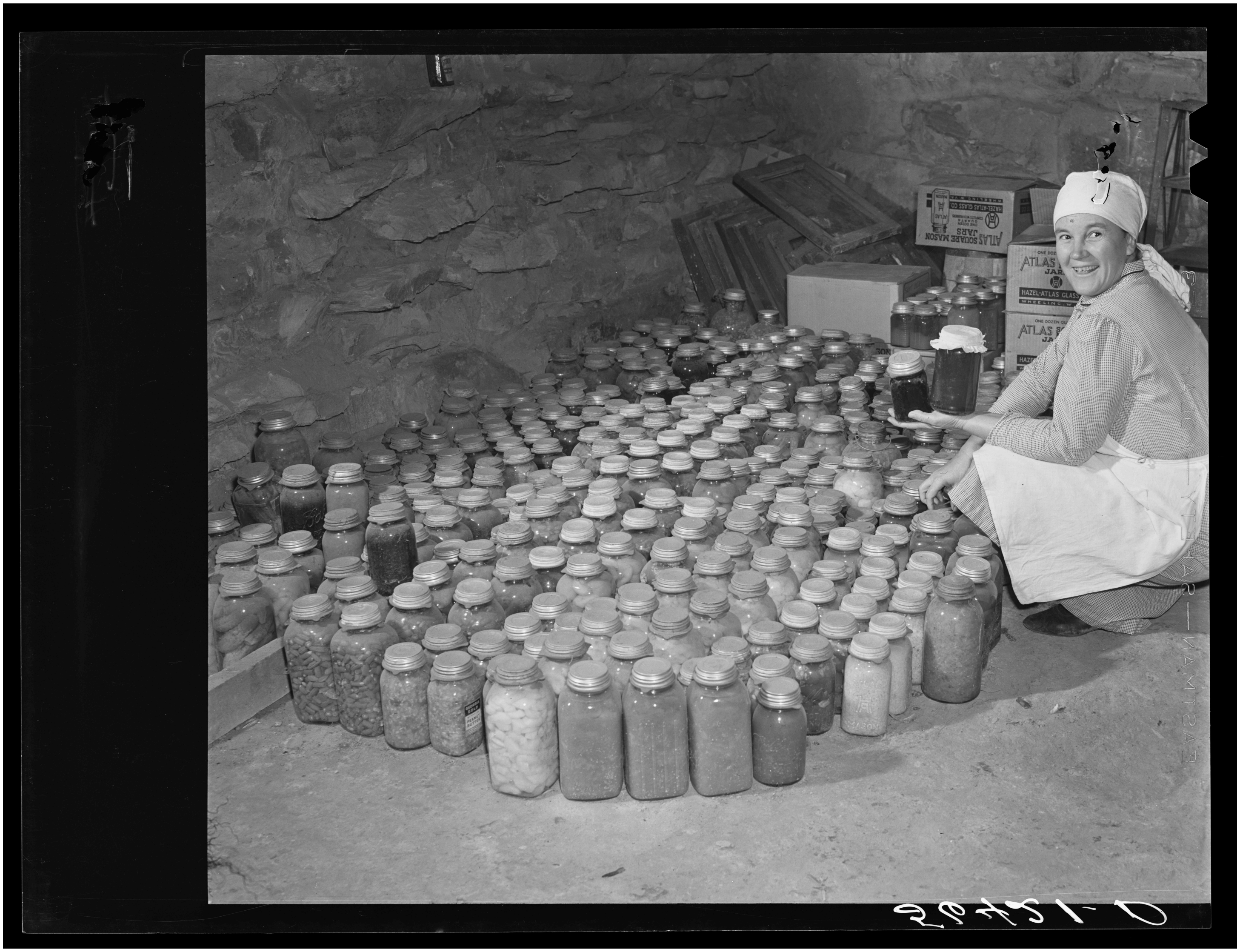
Blacks were some heavy-duty canners!

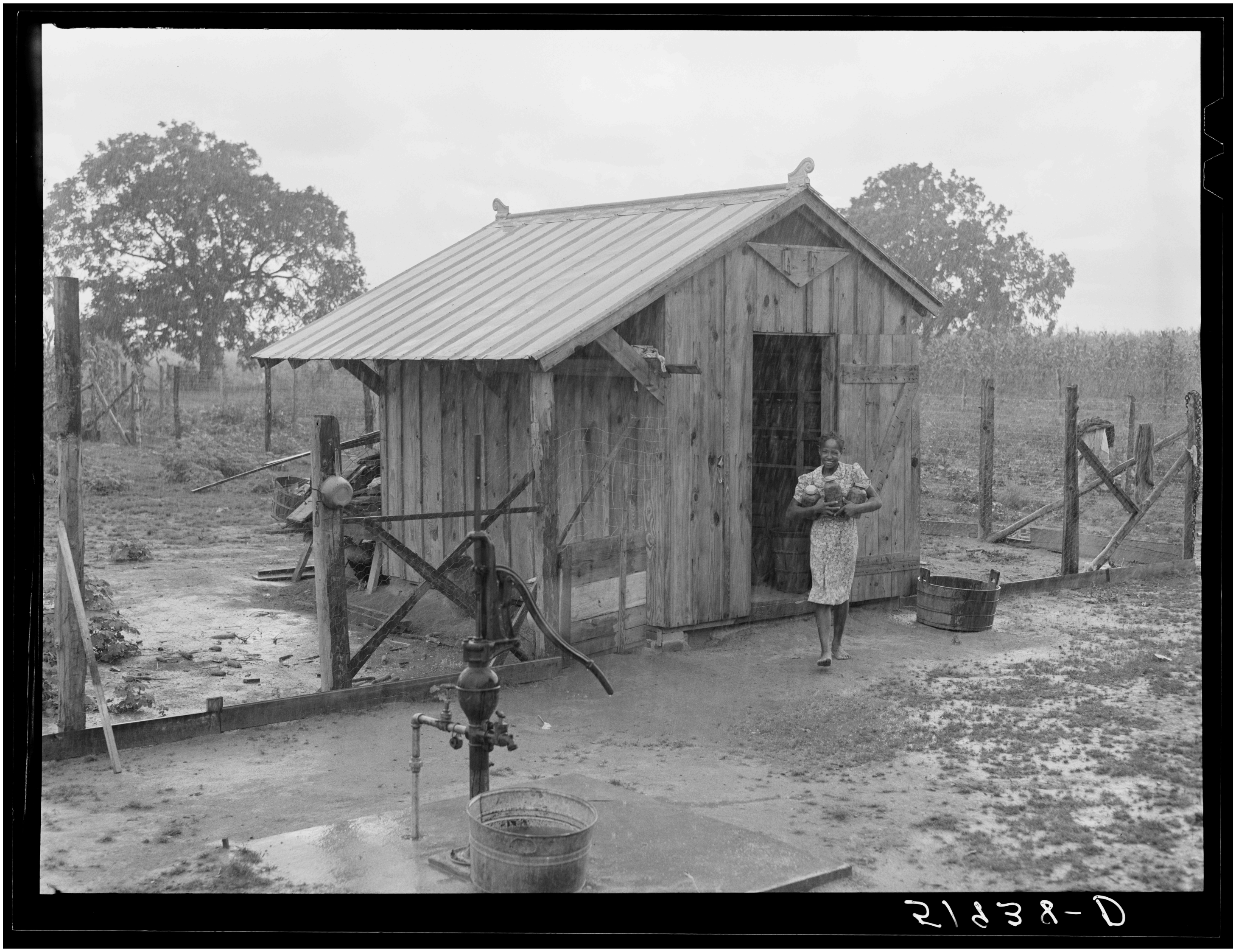

AGFA SAFETY FILM


FLOUR
SAUERS MILLING
EVANSVILLE, ILL.
LADDIE BOY
CUDAHY
RE
PURE

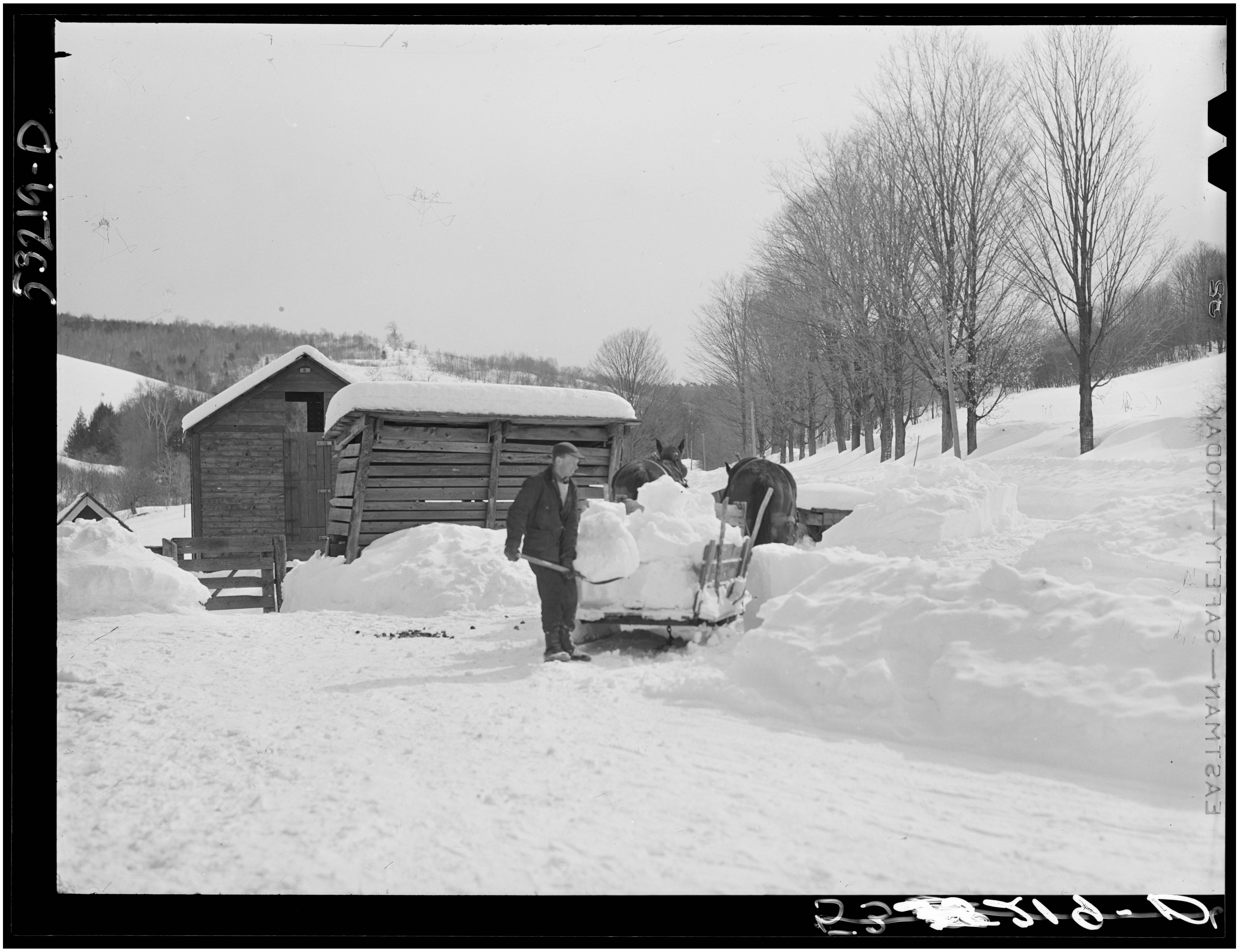
Some people stored meat in the cellar. Cold storage coops were formed where you could rent a cold storage locker. But that is a different post.

This lady has some nice shelving. If you were poor, you stored it on the floor of the cellar.

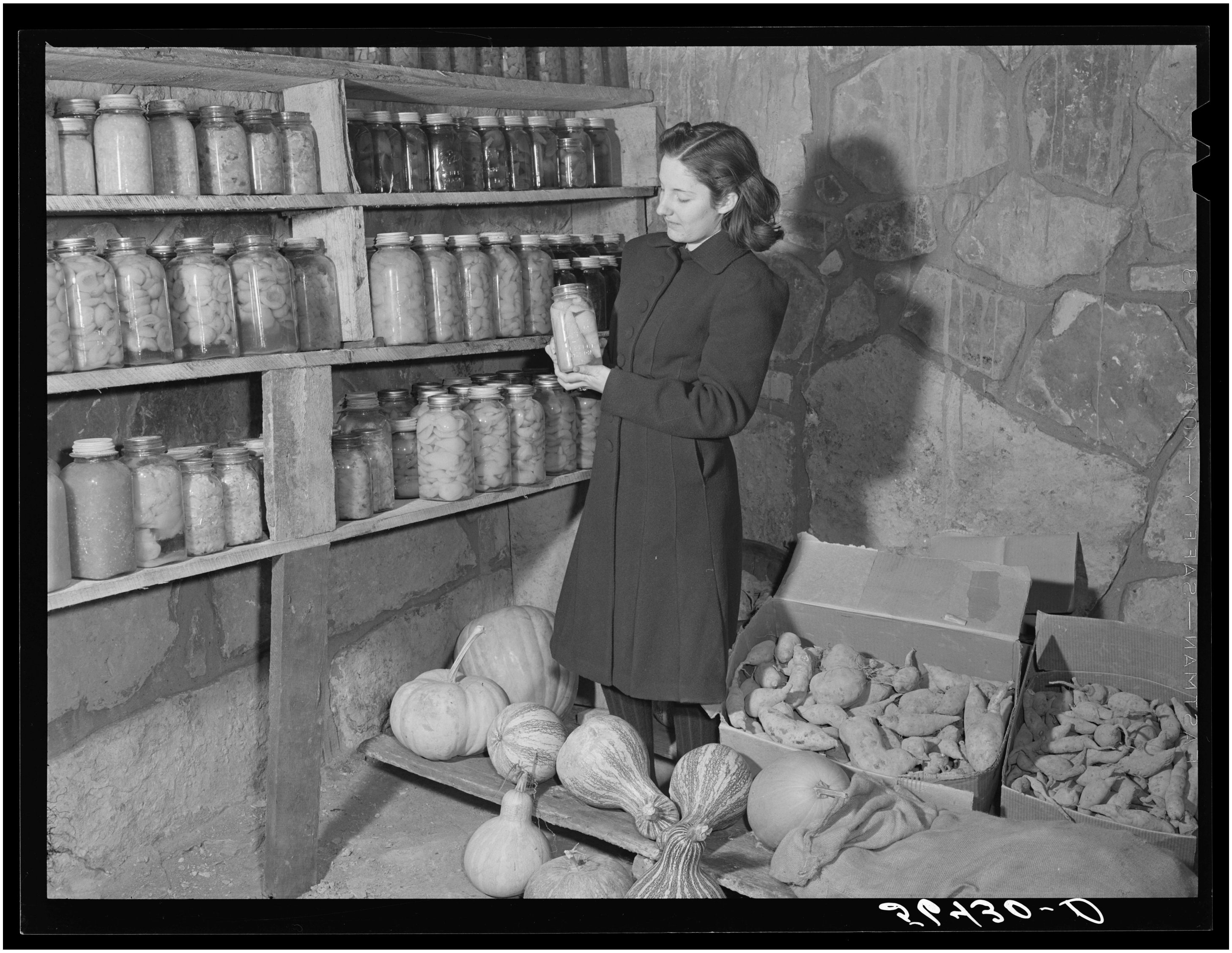




She had to go outside for food and water. (Maybe to poop as well...dunno.)

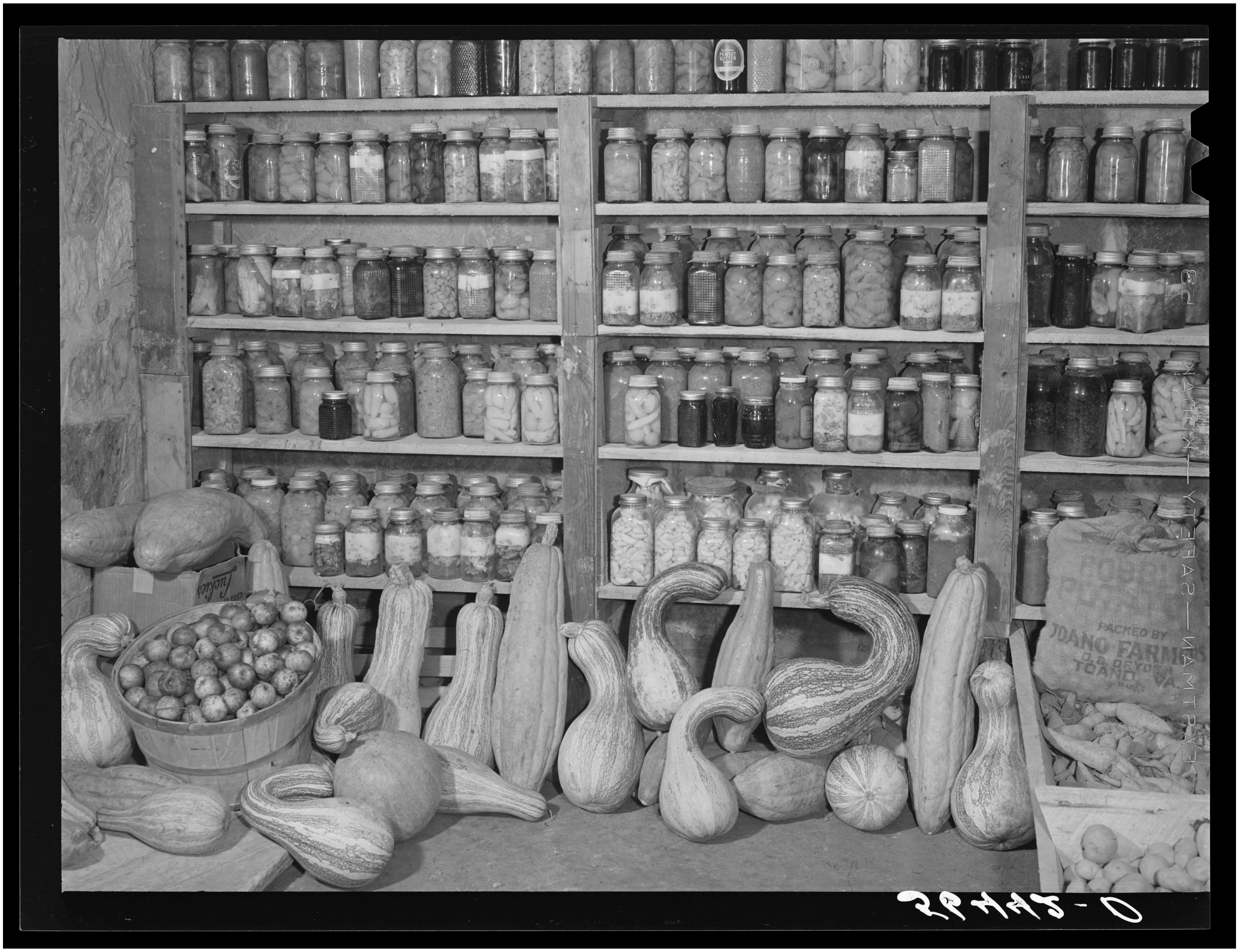


He had to keep the root cellar entrance clean of snow for access and to keep water from melting snow from getting into the cellar.



62430-D

You would have to sort through the food to make sure you didn't have any rotted items that would spread through the food and ruin it.



The long, straight squash are Banana squash. Very good cooked as chunks and sautéed in olive oil and garlic. In L.A. they are sold in slabs. Too big for most people to buy. I never knew why they were sold in slabs when growing up. Then I saw what they looked like once I saw some in the Rustbelt. But in the Rustbelt, they are sold as gourd decorations in the Fall. I know what they are, so I buy them for eating. Other than decorations sold at one store, you can't buy Banana squash here.

"Fort Scott Ranch"
continued

blt. by G. Peraldo, et alia

4 May 78
Marshall

Paradise
Valley,
Nevada

cellar

bldg. F

bldg. C

quarry rubble stone
uncoursed

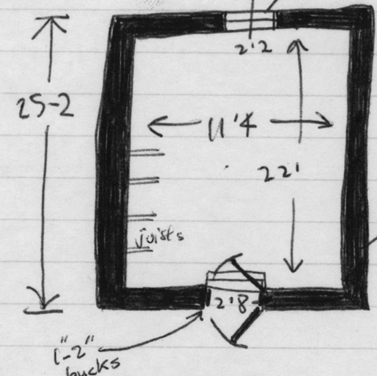
smaller adobe

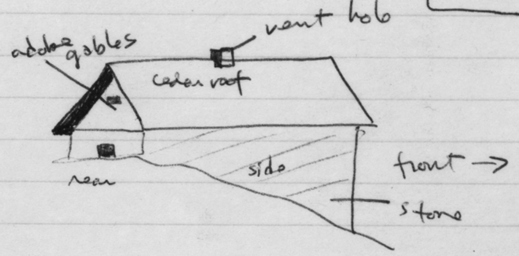
w/ LOFT

potatoes
stored here
now

cement floor

7' ceiling


vertical iron
bars, no glass
N →
2'2
25-2
11'4
22'
joists
1'8" walls granite
2'8
1'-2" bucks


vent hole
adobe gables
cedar roof
rear
side
front →
stone

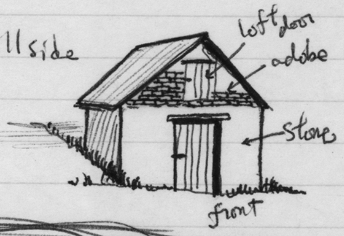
side
view

1x12 floor/loft

2x8 joists on 27" centers

adobe bricks in gables
common bond, 5 x 1

built into hillside


loft door
adobe
stone
front

front + corners = sq. cut
granite, finely dressed
sides, rear = rough granite
rubble boulders with
some dressing

bldg. G

bldg. B

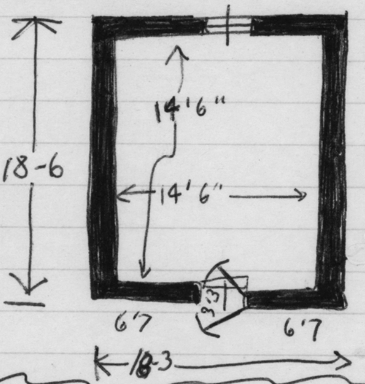
granite
+
adobe
gables

no loft

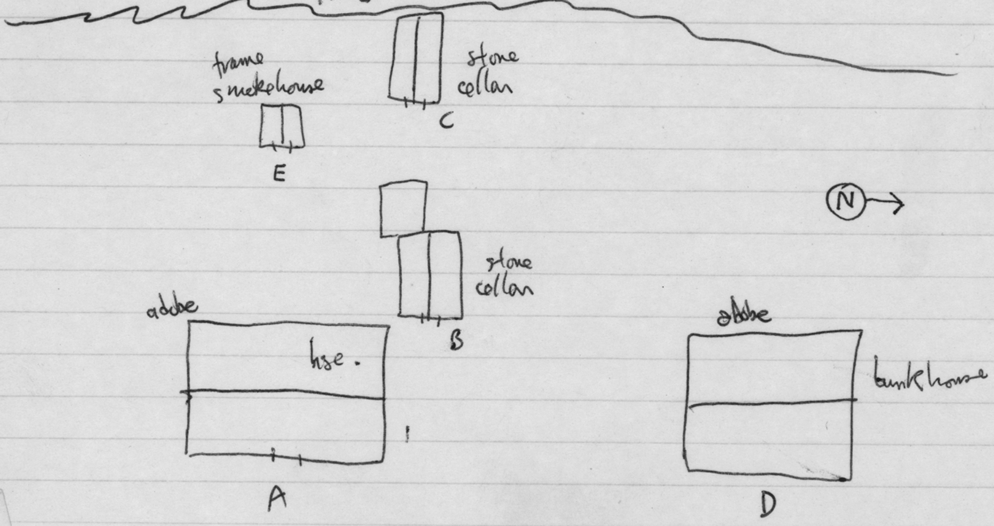
1'8" walls

also blt. into hill

blt. by G. Peraldo

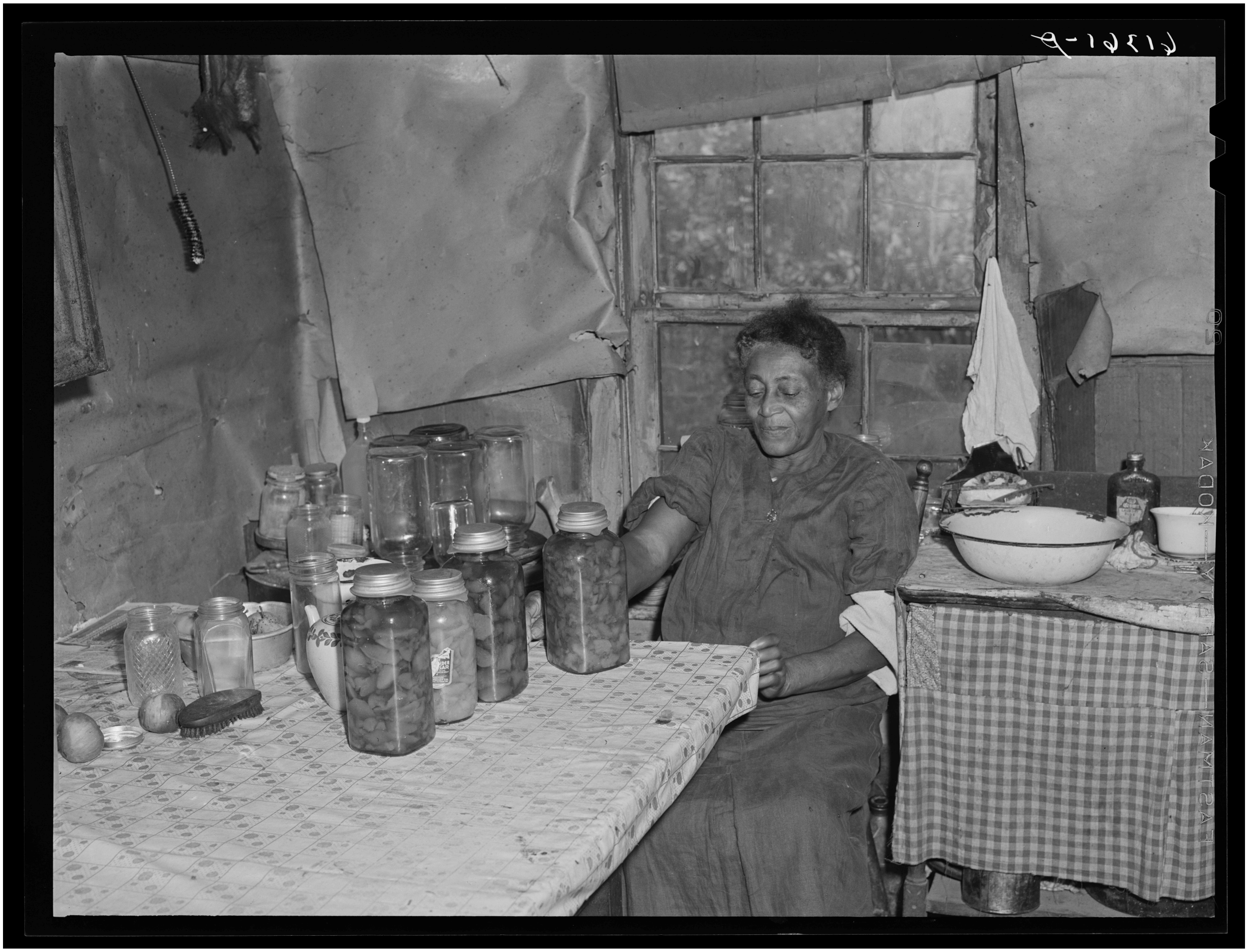

18-6
14'6"
14'6"
3'3
6'7
6'7
18-3

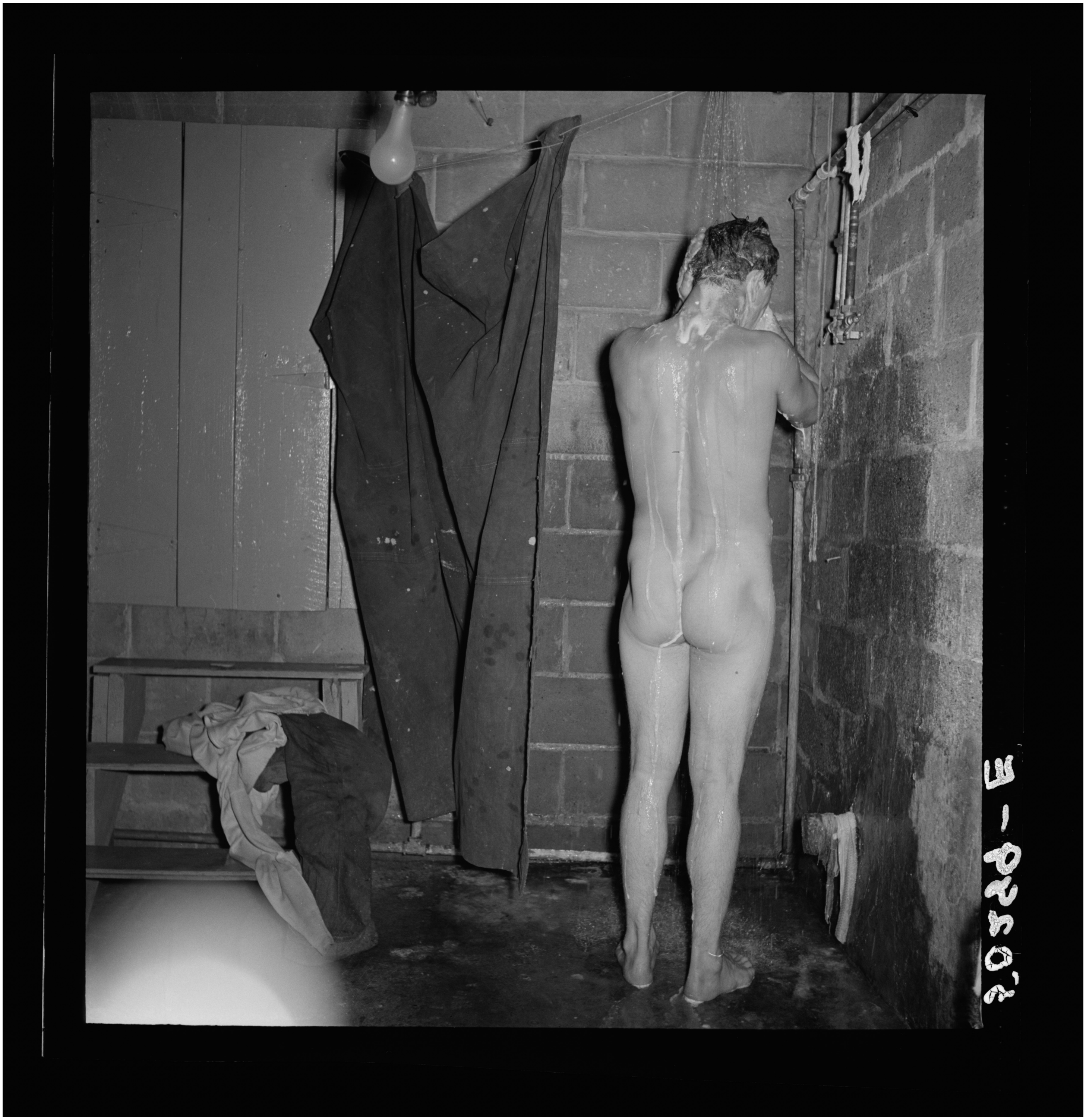
cellar


frame
smokehouse
E
stone
cellar
C
N →
stone
cellar
B
adobe
hse.
A
adobe
bunkhouse
D

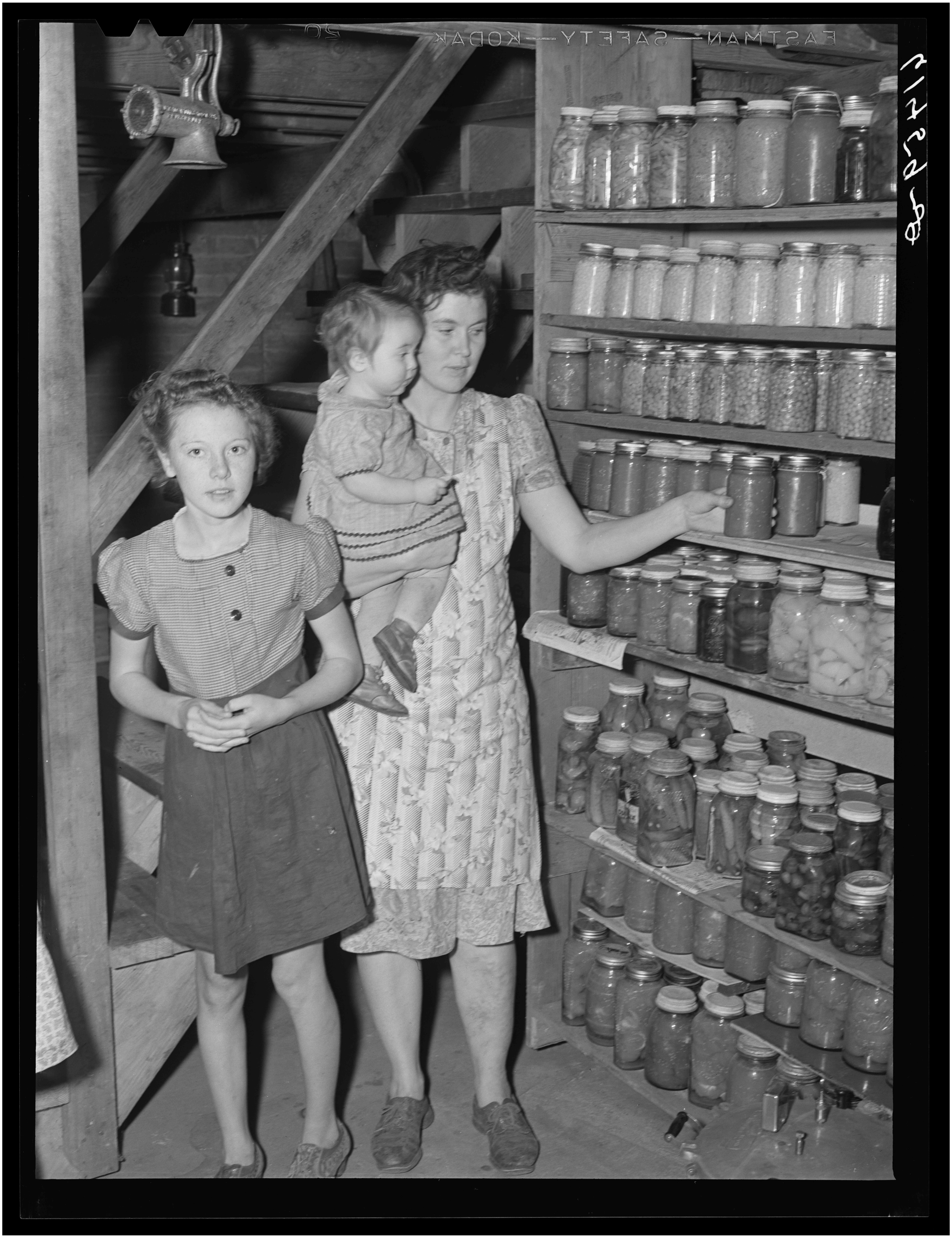
(Not to scale)

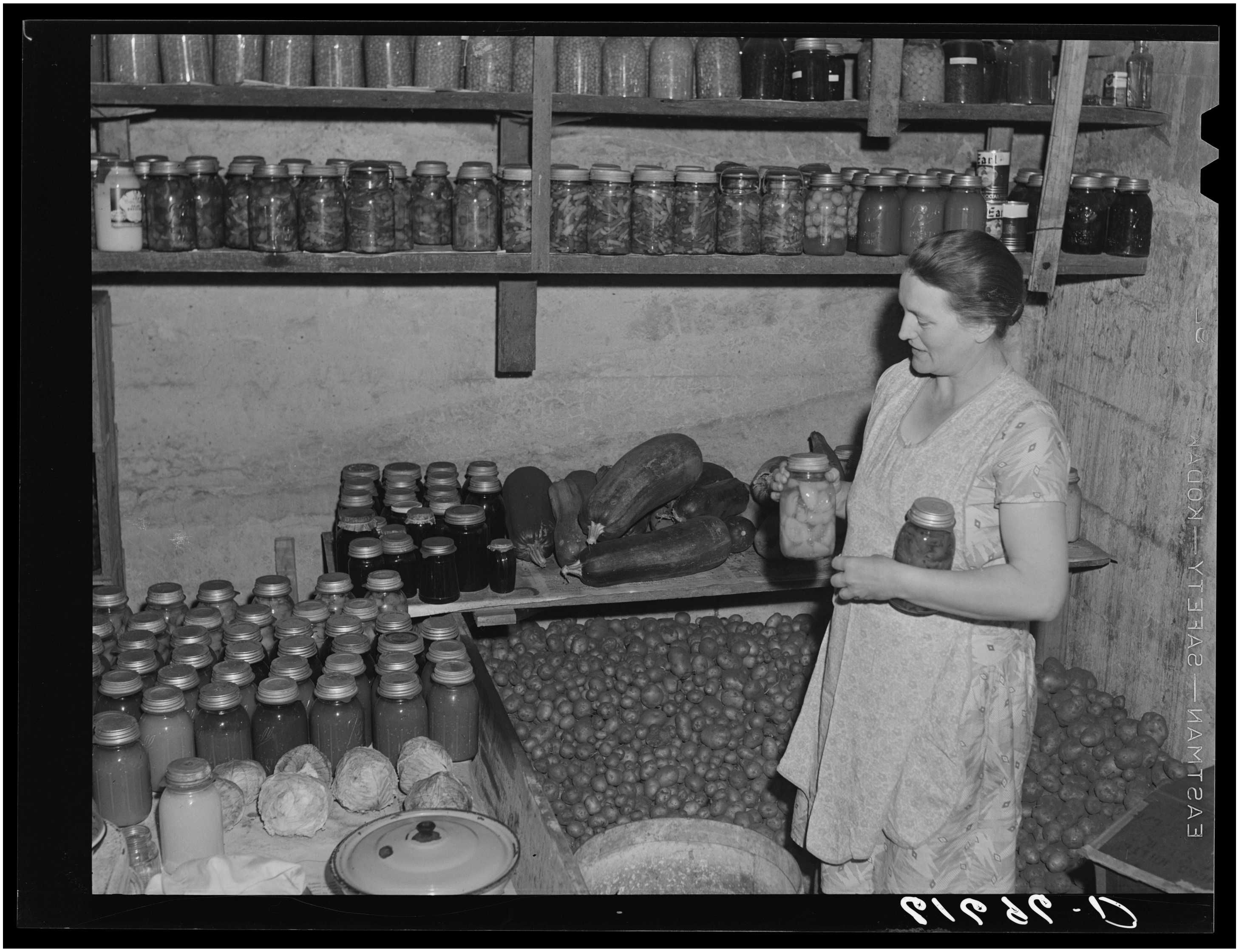
5

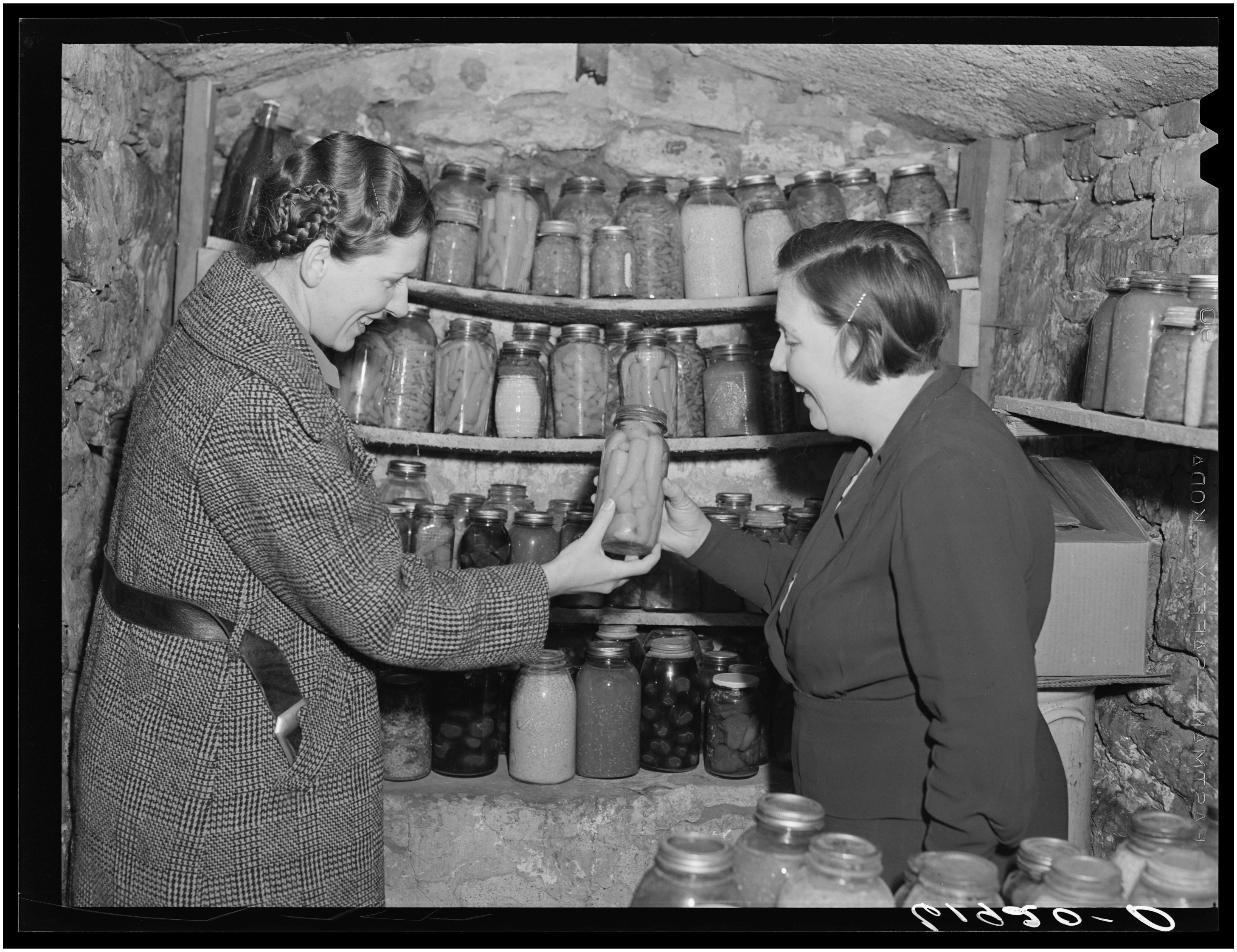

61361-D



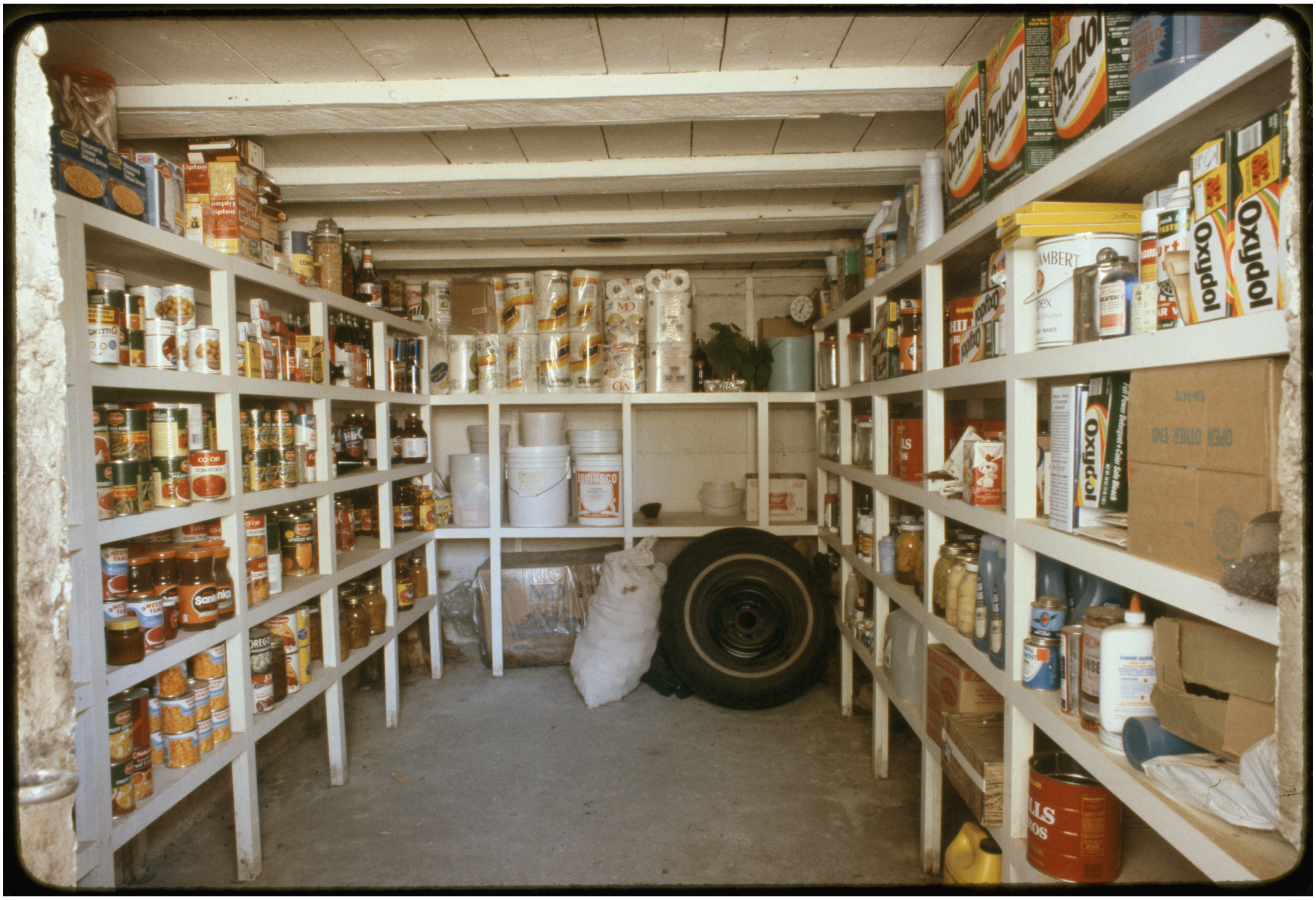
Some people didn't have a shower, so they made one in the cellar.



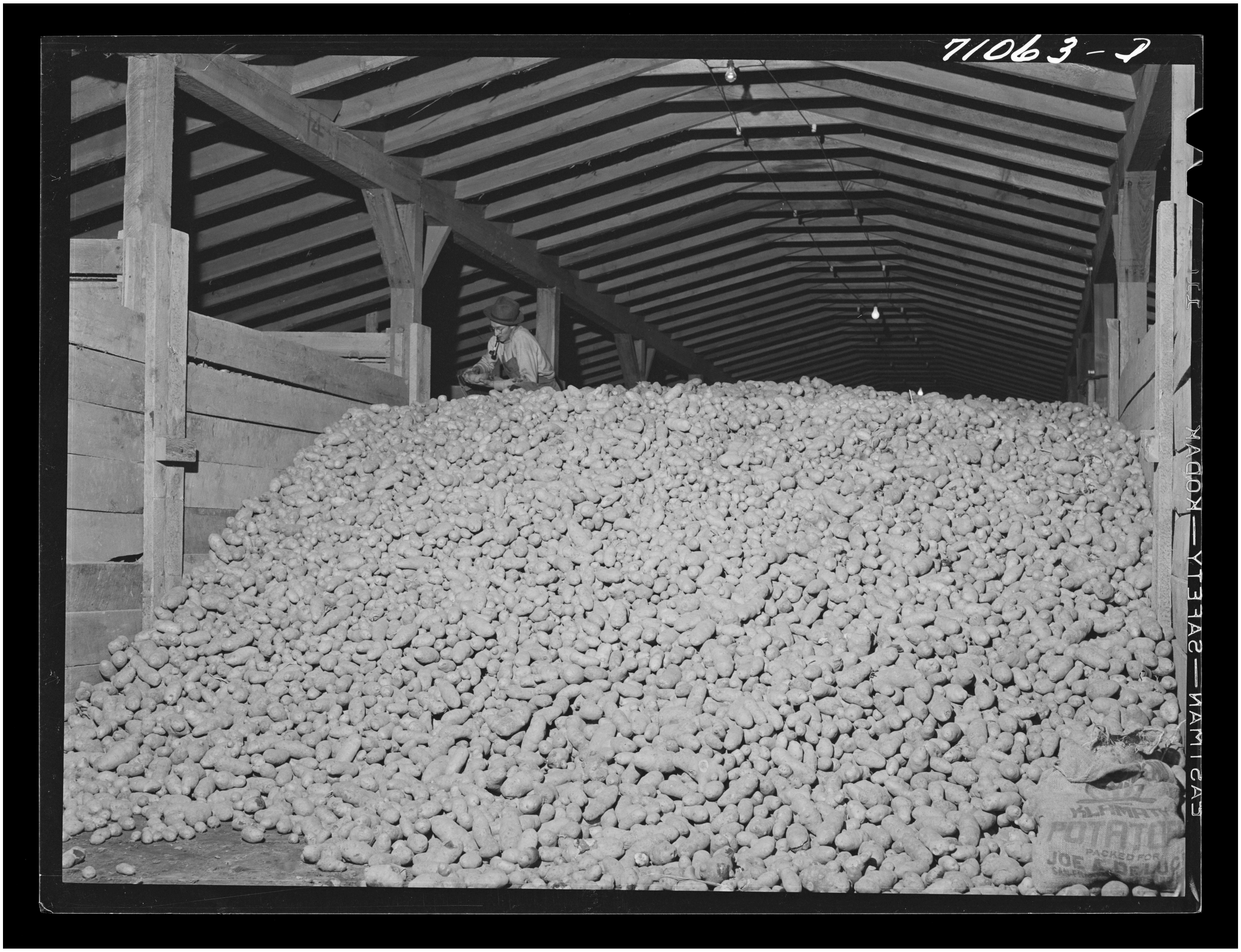


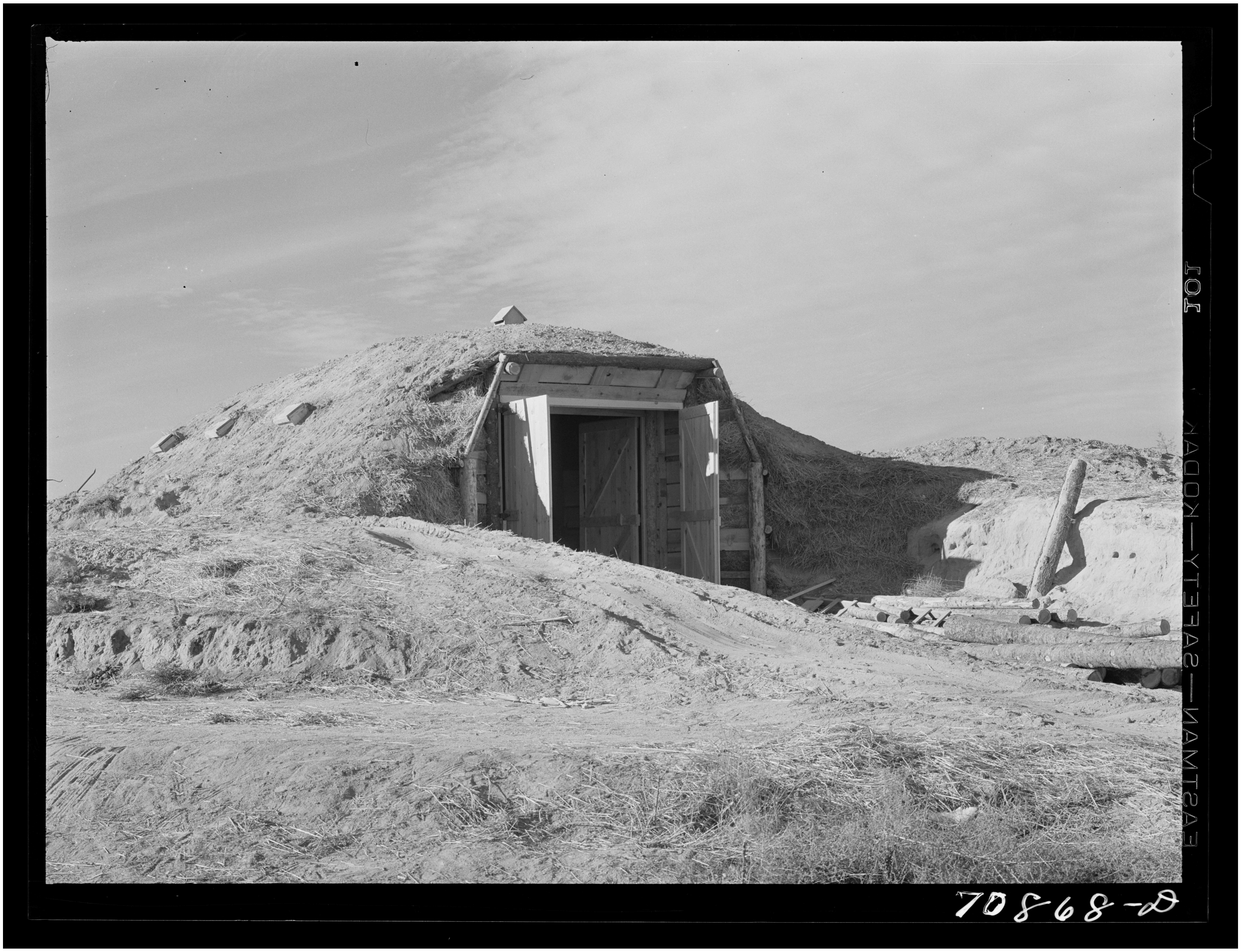


Rehabilitation clients were visited by gov inspectors to make sure they abided by the lending agreement.



A more modern-day cellar.


71063-D
EASTMAN—SAFETY—KODAK
KLAMATH
POTATO
PACKED FOR
JOE A. DEL



Here is the scoop from AI on root cellaring from the late 1930's.

A rehabilitation borrower in 1939 was a low-income or struggling farm family who received supervised, low-interest loans from the Farm Security Administration (FSA) to become self-sustaining during the Great Depression. These borrowers were often victims of foreclosure, drought, or falling prices, and they received not just funds for seeds, tools, and livestock, but also direct guidance on modern, efficient farming techniques to "rehabilitate" their financial position.

Key aspects of a 1939 rehabilitation borrower included:

Supervised Credit: Loans were provided based on careful planning with FSA agents to ensure the family could repay, while also covering necessities like food, clothing, and health.

Purpose: The funds aimed to help farmers move away from dependence on relief and become self-supporting.

Resettlement: Some borrowers were assisted in relocating to more productive land.

Eligibility: These were farmers who had fallen behind due to the Depression and could not secure credit from standard, commercial banks. By 1939, this program was a core part of the New Deal's effort to stabilize the agricultural sector by providing a lifeline to, as some reports indicated, nearly 95,000 farm families for debt adjustments.

Rehabilitation borrowers under the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and related federal programs in the late 1930s were strongly encouraged, and in some cases required, to construct root cellars as part of their efforts to become self-sufficient.

Goal of Self-Sufficiency: The rehabilitation loans, which grew out of the Resettlement Administration and then the FSA (1937), were designed to help low-income farmers survive the Great Depression and Dust Bowl by promoting home food preservation.

Alternative to Refrigeration: In 1939, when most farms lacked electricity for refrigeration, root cellars were vital for storing produce like potatoes, onions, and canned goods over the winter.

Agency Guidance: FSA agents and Home Management supervisors, who closely monitored the borrowers' farm and home plans, provided technical advice and blueprints for constructing these "dugouts" or root cellars.

Specific Contexts: Similar programs, such as those overseen by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), specifically provided loans and grants to enable borrowers to "construct or repair houses, barns, outbuildings and root cellars".

These structures sometimes doubled as storm cellars or "fraidy holes" in regions prone to severe weather.

Families who received grants or loans under the Farm Security Administration (FSA) rural rehabilitation program in the late 1930s, including around 1939, were generally expected to preserve eighty (80) quarts of canned food per person.

Goal: This requirement was part of a broader effort to ensure food security for farm families, aiming for self-sufficiency to last through the winter months.

Requirements: In addition to canning, these rehabilitation plans often required families to build specialized food storage to handle this volume.

Scope: This was a significant part of the rehabilitation, aimed at moving families away from a limited diet (often described as "meat, meal, and molasses") to a more sustainable, self-sufficient, and healthy diet.

Some broader recommendations during the era, particularly leading into the World War II period, ranged from 85 to 115 quarts of produce per person.

Root cellars were often built above ground or partially embanked in 1939 to overcome high water tables, rocky soil, or shallow bedrock that made deep excavation difficult. These structures allowed for crucial, natural, and inexpensive food preservation, using thick walls, soil insulation, and ventilation to maintain cool, humid conditions for storing produce.

Key Reasons for Above-Ground Construction:

Environmental Constraints: In areas with high water tables, digging deep would result in flooding. Above-ground or "banked" cellars (built into a small slope) provided the necessary cold, humid environment without the risk of water damage.

Soil Conditions: Where the bedrock was too close to the surface, digging down was impossible.

Construction Ease & Efficiency: They were often easier to build than fully subterranean, allowing farmers to use local materials like rock, timber, and earth to insulate, ensuring temperatures stayed just above freezing to prevent produce from rotting or freezing.

Accessibility & Function: Above-ground cellars were easy to access for storing heavy, bulky, or large quantities of produce, such as potatoes, turnips, and apples

<><><><>

Daniel D. Teoli Jr. Archival Collection
Daniel D. Teoli Jr. Small Gauge Film Archive
Daniel D. Teoli Jr. Advertising Archive
Daniel D. Teoli Jr. VHS Video Archive
Daniel D. Teoli Jr. Popular Culture Archive
Daniel D. Teoli Jr. Audio Archive
Daniel D. Teoli Jr. Social Documentary Photography